The FLYING STOWAWAYS

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THE MIRACLE 'PLANE
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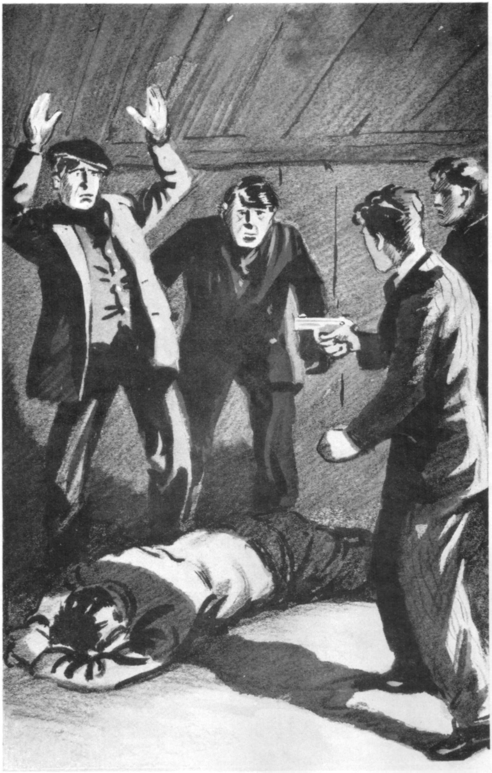

IN THE DIM LIGHT JIM COULD SEE GRICE AND PETE HANGING BACK AND THE BOSS HALF-CONSCIOUS ON THE FLOOR.

p. 32

THE
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BY

JOHN CREASEY

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THE
FLYING STOWAWAYS

CHAPTER I

TWO STRANGERS

"AND there she is, Skipper! The finest flying boat that's ever left land or sea, perfect in every detail!"

The speaker was a jolly-looking, rotund little man whose name was Miller. He was standing by the side of a great bird of the air, a monster with a vast wing-span, three mighty Bristol Pegasus engines, cabin capacity for twenty people, and able to carry as much luggage as the huge trans-Atlantic flying boats that had lately been put into service between England and the United States.

In many respects the *White King* was a similar machine, but there were one or two vital differences. For she had been built for Polar flying, not for stupendous dashes across thousands of miles of ocean, and there was some excuse for Mr. Miller's enthusiastic outburst.

The tall, rugged-looking man he had addressed as Skipper smiled. He was used to the other's enthusiasm, although this time he was inclined to share it. Every new machine turned out by the Miller Company, however, was considered the best ever by the cheerful junior partner of the aeroplane company.

Skipper John Crane was famous throughout the world for his flying performances and his judgment of aeroplanes. That was the reason why Sir Arthur Penfold had asked him to lead an expedition to the North Pole, and to spend some months there investigating the conditions, and finding many things of scientific importance. It was a small party, seven in all, including the Skipper, a medical man, two scientists and three "mechanics"—although the mechanics were airmen almost as famous as Skipper Crane himself.

The preparations for the trip had been in hand for a long time. Now, however, everything was loaded, even to the provisions and the petrol. Dusk was falling over the quiet Surrey countryside where the 'plane was waiting, and at the first streaks of dawn the *White King* would be up in the air, winging its way across the skies towards the uncharted region of the Great White Beyond.

Mr. Miller and the Skipper walked twice round the aeroplane, occasionally nodding to the other mechanics fussing about the three great engines. The cabin was being cleaned out, first aid was being stored in the boxes, the radio was having its last test. Before darkness came everything would be ship-shape. The great monoplane would be zealously watched by three or four night-guards, who would hand over to the Skipper and the mechanics next morning.

They turned away at last, and the Skipper said with a smile.

"I really think we've a winner there, Mr. Miller."

"I'm sure you have! And I might tell you that Sir Arthur is well pleased, Skipper!"

"Seeing that he knows nothing about aeroplanes, that's not surprising," chuckled the Skipper. "Why, that youngster of his could tell him more!"

"You mean Jim Penfold? I wouldn't be surprised if you're right, Crane. A likely youngster, that, and I know that he tried to move heaven and earth to come with you in the flight. But Sir Arthur said no, and very wisely I think."

The Skipper shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know. The youngster has left school for the summer term, and he has six or seven weeks on his hands. I would have taken him with pleasure."

"Would you, by Jove!" exclaimed Miller. "I should have thought you were all against it. After all, it's a pretty stiff job, Skip!"

Skipper Crane nodded, smiling a little.

"I know. But I was a boy of sixteen when I first went on an expedition to the North Pole, and I had my flying certificate when I was eighteen—flying over the trenches at Flanders, Mr. Miller, and I assure you that was no schoolboy's holiday! Young Jim is seventeen, and he's as fit as a fiddle. Between ourselves, I was sorry he wasn't allowed to come. I think he has the making of a great fellow in him!"

"I'm inclined to agree," admitted the rosy-cheeked little man. "All the same, you can hardly blame his father for not letting him come."

"No-o. I suppose not. Anyhow, it's too late to talk about it now. Isn't that Sir Arthur by the offices over there?"

Both men shaded the sun from their eyes with their hands, looking across the flying fields towards the offices of the company. Standing by the open doors was a tall, dignified looking man who was looking about him. It was Sir Arthur Penfold without a doubt, and the Skipper went quickly towards the rich man who was financing this expedition for arctic discovery.

As the two men hurried away a sturdy, curly-haired youngster of some seventeen summers broke through a gap in a hedge. He was half-smiling, half-scowling, for he had heard a great deal that interested him, although he had not intended to eavesdrop. On the other side of the hedge as he had been, it had been hopeless for him to try not to hear, for the two speakers had not kept their voices down.

And Jim Penfold now knew that the Skipper had no objection to his taking part in the expedition!

There were many good points about Jim, and one of them was a complete lack of vanity. It had been good to hear what the Skipper thought of him, but that was by no means the chief thought in his mind. He was thinking reluctantly of the fact that at six o'clock next morning the *White King* would take off like a ghost towards the north, and he would be standing and waving to the crew, instead of being in the cabin waving to the spectators.

The thing he had wanted most in the world was to join the expedition, but he had found his father adamant. All his pleading had been of no avail. He was too good a sportsman to worry too much about it, but he could not keep back an acute disappointment.

And now a wild, mad idea was going through his mind, one that made his gasp inwardly, and which he thrust aside immediately. Nonetheless he was contemplating the possibilities as he strolled towards the King of the Skies.

He had been walking near the airfield, and aiming for the gap in the hedge, when he had overheard the conversation between Mr. Miller and Skipper Crane. A last look in daylight at the great flying boat, and then——

He heaved a sigh, and stood still for a moment, watching the last of the luggage go into the hold at the rear of the cabin. It was loaded from the outside, but there was a communicating cabin door, he knew, joining up the luggage-room and the passenger cabin. And there was a lot of spare room in that luggage place——

"Don't be an ass!" he said to himself, half aloud. "As soon as they found me they'd turn back, or send me back from the nearest port by ship. It's a crazy idea!"

"What's a crazy idea?" came the voice from behind him.

Jim Penfold was startled by the words, and he revealed the fact as he swung round on his heel towards the speaker. He saw a youngster, no older than himself, a little down-at-heel and thin. But there was something likeable about him, and his voice was pleasant and educated.

Jim laughed awkwardly.

"Oh, just something that passed through my mind, that's all."

The stranger—and to each other they were both strangers—wrinkled his eyes. The smile was a contagious one, and Jim found himself beaming widely. The other suddenly and unexpectedly shot out his hand. It was harder than Jim's, browner too, and showing signs of hard work, but it was spotlessly clean.

"My name's Howell—sometimes called Buster," he said cheerfully. "And you?"

"Penfold, often called Jim," said Jim as he shook the other's hand firmly. At the same time he saw the expression of surprise on Buster Howell's face, and burst out laughing. "Yes, Sir Arthur is my father."

"If I hadn't heard you talking a little while ago," said Buster Howell with a smile Jim did not entirely understand, "I'd have run a mile! But it's rather different now."

Jim looked puzzled, and said that he was. Buster Howell shrugged his shoulders.

"No, I haven't anything against your father, Penfold, because I've never met him. But I was thinking of causing him quite a lot of annoyance."

Still Jim did not understand what the other was getting at, but he spoke quickly:

"That's not a sound idea, I promise you! Dad has a nasty habit of dealing quickly with people who annoy him!"

"I expect so! But I'm prepared to take the risk," returned the newcomer.

Jim was sure the other was no older than himself, and yet Buster Howell had a much older manner, and a confidence that Jim lacked. His eyes twinkled as he waited for Jim's comments. They came quickly.

"I wish you'd explain what you're talking about, man!"

"Well—much the same as you were talking about just now—or thinking about," added Buster Howell. "I'm short, I'm thirsting for some excitement, and, as my name suggests, I'm always busting into places. I've been wondering what chance there is of busting into the luggage cabin overnight, and hiding behind some of the equipment. I could take in enough food for a few days, and it'd be as safe as houses. I'd get some of the way, if not all of it. See the idea?"

The thing that the other was talking about had indeed been slowly forcing its way through Jim's mind, but now the cat was out of the bag with a vengeance! For a moment Jim could not find words with which to answer, but at last he drew a deep breath, and there was a sudden light in his grey eyes.

"You're seriously going to try?"

"Yes. Unless you're going to warn the night-guards——"

Jim's eyes narrowed, and his voice was sharp.

"If you think that I'm a sneak, I'll——"

"Oi, steady!" protested Buster Howell. "I was joking, honest to goodness. I wouldn't have spoken to you about it unless I'd been sure of you."

Jim Penfold was instantly mollified.

"That's true and I'm sorry, Buster. Well—look here, you're not pulling my leg?"

"No, I assure you I'm not. I've nothing to do, and I've no money," admitted Buster Howell frankly. "Add to that the fact that I love excitement, and you can understand why I'm going to try to get away with it. And hearing you talking to yourself told me that you were playing with the same idea."

Jim hesitated.

"We-ell—it had just flashed through my mind. The Skipper—John Crane—was saying just now that he would have had no objection to me going, which suggests he thinks I could stick it out all right. But Dad would go right in the air," he added ruefully. "It's hardly fair to try and trick him."

"All's fair in adventure!" exclaimed Buster Howell. "But no, it's not fair of me to try and persuade you. *I'm* going to try, so I wonder if you could tell me one or two things. Or even let me have a look at the *King*," he added hopefully.

Jim didn't hesitate.

"Yes, come on! The mechanics all know me, and they won't ask who you are, although it'll be hard to slip through the guards to-night. There'll be one at the tail, and one the nose, with a man at each wing tip."

Buster laughed softly.

"I'll handle them all right, believe me! I've stowed away aboard ship, but never in an aeroplane, although it should be easy. Now mum's the word!"

Jim chuckled to himself at the way the other took control of affairs. Together they approached the *White King*, and as Jim had prophesied, none of the mechanics raised any query. At last they were satisfied—particularly that there was ample room at the back of the luggage for both of them!

"Coming?" Buster Howell asked. "It'd be grand fun to have a companion, Jim."

"Ye-es. But—but I can't make up my mind," said Jim Penfold awkwardly. "As I said, it doesn't seem fair to Dad. I—I'll see."

Buster didn't try to persuade him. He was the coolest card Jim had ever met in a lad of his own age.

"Right-ho! Let's leave it like this. I'm coming aboard at five o'clock in the morning, an hour before the take off. I'll come by the gap—where you just entered the field—and if you're here, we'll do it together. Is that a bargain?"

"That's a bargain," agreed Jim, and they shook hands on it. Buster Howell turned away, squeezed his way through the hedge, and was soon lost to sight. Jim sighed heavily, but his eyes were gleaming. The prospect of stowing away on the *White King* was enticing, and yet——

"It wouldn't be fair," thought Jim Penfold a little miserably. "No, I shan't go."

But he could not see into the future, or he might have spoken differently.

CHAPTER II

"THEY'RE OFF!"

JIM PENFOLD saw his father talking with Skipper Crane when he reached the offices, and he wondered what the conversation was about. His heart warmed to the Skipper, for putting in a word for him, even though he had had no luck.

Sir Arthur Penfold turned towards his son suddenly.

"Hallo, Jim! Might have expected you about here, I suppose. Had a last look at the *King?*"

"The last one by daylight," smiled Jim, "and for a month or two."

"The last look by any light for a month or two," said his father a little sharply. "Afraid I've some disappointing news for you, my boy. I've been called to America urgently, and I'm catching a boat from Southampton to-night. Have to fly there. I'm arranging for you to go up on the night train to your uncle in Doncaster. So there won't be a Penfold to see the start of the flight, but it can't be helped."

Jim could not prevent himself from showing his acute disappointment. He had been looking forward immensely to watching the great flying-boat take off on its flight of exploration, but now that was dashed away from him. And, as far as he could see, without any real need. He could easily travel up to Doncaster on the following day.

"But—but can't I go up to-morrow?" he asked quickly. "I'll be in Doncaster almost as soon, and——"

"Sorry, my boy, I've arranged it," said Sir Arthur bluffly. "Don't let's start another argument."

Jim might have tried to persuade his father, little hope though there would be, but for the fact that the others were present. He shrugged his shoulders, and sauntered off miserably. He fancied that he caught a glimpse of sympathy in Skipper Crane's eyes, but he could not be sure.

He kicked angrily at a stone as he reached the gates of the aerodrome.

It was typical of his father to come to a sudden decision like that, and the injustice of it rankled. Sir Arthur knew just how keen the lad was, and must have realised the tremendous disappointment. But he had given his orders, and they would have to be obeyed.

There were times when Jim Penfold could not understand the older man. In some ways he liked his father, but he was always conscious of a barrier between them. They did not seem to understand each other at all.

Jim was hardly old enough to realise that Sir Arthur, a rich widower, was always used to doing just what he liked, and to having other people obey his orders without the slightest question. Moreover, father and son had seen little of each other in recent years, excepting at holidays. Even they had not always been together, and in some ways Jim was a complete stranger to the rich baronet.

His anger cooled a little by the time his father pulled up beside him, in the big Daimler that was chauffeur driven.

"Ready, my boy?"

"Oh—yes," said Jim suddenly. "I must just wish the Skipper good-luck."

"Certainly, certainly," admitted the older man, and he waited patiently enough while Jim went to shake hands with the Skipper and the other members of the crew. He did not stay long, and the others knew that he was feeling his disappointment too keenly. In fact as soon as he was out of earshot, Skipper Crane said with a frown.

"That seemed needless, didn't it? Young Jim has been looking forward to this for weeks."

"His father's a bit of a tartar," said one of the other pilots, "even though he is financing this expedition. Well, there they go."

The Daimler had disappeared through the main gates of the aerodrome, and was quickly lost to sight. The airmen busied themselves with their last details, while in the car Jim Penfold sat very silently next to his father.

He broke the silence as they reached London.

"Dad—why did you think it wasn't wise for me to go with the *King?* I've been up in the air quite a bit."

"Yes, I know," said his father quickly. "Sorry, my boy. I might have thought seriously of it, but the Skipper was quite definite. He said that you might be in the way, and that he needed men of experience. Now let's hear no more about it. I shall go straight to Croydon aerodrome for a 'plane to get me to Southampton, after calling at the house. You'll be catching the ten o'clock train from Euston. Wilson has booked the tickets."

Jim said nothing, and the baronet did not seem to expect any reply. He hardly knew the reason for the other's silence, however. Had he done so he might have had a shock.

For Jim was inwardly fuming.

His father had told a deliberate lie! The Skipper had assured Mr. Miller that he had put a word in for the youngster, and now Sir Arthur blamed the Skipper for not letting him accompany the flight! Jim realised that his father thus shifted the responsibility, but he felt indignant and reproachful. Certainly he could not understand a man who would deliberately deceive his own son. The barrier that had always been between them was made much stiffer and higher that evening.

They soon reached their house in Clarges Street. Shortly afterwards Jim shook hands with his father, and wished him a good trip to America. Then the lad had to face a decision that had been hovering in his mind for the past hour.

Should he go with Buster Howell or not?

The only reason he had not said "yes" when he had been with the young stranger was that he did not think it fair. Well, his father hardly deserved fairness, or so Jim told himself. There was no need to hesitate on that score.

And the chances were much brighter than they had been.

No one would miss him, at home or at the aerodrome. True, he would be expected at Doncaster, but if anyone was at the station there to meet him, it would be assumed that he had missed the train. Wilson—his father's butler—would want to see him to Euston, but Jim believed he could easily avoid that.

For perhaps ten minutes he remained undecided. Then he suddenly snapped his fingers, and his eyes gleamed.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed, and from that moment onwards the world seemed a brighter, better place.

As he had expected, it was easy to handle Wilson. The latter sent for a cab, bundled Jim's luggage in it, and told the man to drive to Euston. The cabby did so, but he was not to know that Jim simply deposited a larger case at the cloak-room, and took a small one—specially packed—with him as he hurried to Waterloo, and took a train to Epsom. From Epsom to the flying field of the Miller Company it was only a walk of half an hour, and Jim had ample time to spare, for he reached the station just after eleven o'clock.

For the past hour or two, since he had made the great decision, his mind had been in a whirl. He felt inwardly excited, and somehow he could not prevent himself from feeling that people were staring at him from every house, that folk passing him in the street and at the station looked uncertainly at him.

He knew that this was absurd, but nonetheless he was glad when he left the street lights of the Surrey town and started to walk along the narrow country roads.

Now, for the first time, he had an opportunity of considering his decision, and the more he thought of it the happier he felt. It would be a tremendous adventure, and there was a chance that they would be in the luggage compartment so long that it would be impossible for the Skipper to send him back to England.

Now, too, Jim could see the way in which things had worked out to his advantage. Supposing the flying boat reached Newfoundland—its first base—and he was discovered with the other stowaway? It would be useless for the Skipper to send an urgent message to his father in London, because his father would be in America, where he was going to stay for some weeks. Jim knew, too, that the older man had not given his address to the captain of the *White King*.

At that time it did not seriously occur to Jim that anything would go wrong with his plans. The fact that he was to meet Buster Howell, too, gave him confidence. In his mind he was already winging his way across the Atlantic, on the start of the great expedition.

But there was one dark thought in his mind.

In some ways he supposed he should be glad that his father had deliberately lied to him. Otherwise Jim would not have started off. On the other hand, it was a rotten feeling to think that he could not rely on what his father said, and even worse to feel that he really could not like the older man.

Jim did not realise that his youth had been strange in many ways, and that if Sir Arthur was a stranger to him, then he was an even greater stranger to Sir Arthur. There were other things, too; worries that Jim knew nothing about and which affected his father.

"Well, there it is," muttered Jim to himself. "And now I must forget it. Ah! Here are the main gates!"

He had reached the gates of the aerodrome, and he stood by them for a few minutes, wondering whether he should try to climb them, or whether it would be wiser to go the long way round, and slip through the hedge.

It did not take him long to decide. The gates were locked at that time of night, and were twelve feet high, made of wrought iron and with sharp spikes at the top. Great precautions were taken, he knew, to make sure that no unauthorised persons went into the grounds of the aerodrome and the factory. There were important secrets always in the offices, and at the factory itself there was always a guard of several armed men.

Jim knew that attempts had been made to break into the offices, but he did not anticipate much trouble himself. It was the factory building where the guard was concentrated, and of course, the *White King* would be thoroughly guarded that night.

Buster Howell had not seemed in any way deterred by that, however, and Jim saw no reason why he should be particularly worried.

He was feeling tired now, for he had been up since six o'clock that morning, and he had had a busy as well as an exciting day. Moreover, the decision to stow away on board the flying boat had eaten up a tremendous amount of his nervous energy.

He knew, however, that there was an old barn near the gap in the hedge, and he proposed to lie down there for a while, and snatch a few hours' sleep. He did not doubt that he would wake up in time to meet Buster at the gap at five o'clock.

By the time he reached the barn, after walking nearly another two miles over rough ground, and through a darkness made worse by the fact that he was almost afraid of meeting a stranger who would challenge him, he was dead beat. There was plenty of straw in the barn, however, and it made a comfortable bed. In five minutes he was sleeping soundly, and there was no noise at all over the fields or the aerodrome.

He did not know how long he laid there, but suddenly his eyes opened, and he felt his body rigid with tension. At first he hardly knew why. Then he heard a mutter of voices and, through the open door of the barn, he saw the shining of a torch light.

In a moment he was wide awake, and alert.

He had no real idea what this meant. It was still pitch dark, but there was no sound of scuffling or alarm, and it did not strike him that the talkers outside were looking for anyone. What did they want here? Who were they?

He waited tensely. The muttering stopped for a while, and then he heard the voices again—*much nearer than they had been before*. Moreover, there was no sign of the torch light, although he knew the talkers were within a few yards of the barn.

He dared not move, for he would have made a lot of noise in the straw. He pressed himself as close to the ground as he could, hardly daring to breathe. Then suddenly he could see the vague outline of a man's head and shoulders against the dark sky. A second followed, and his heart seemed to turn over.

These fellows were coming into the barn!

It seemed impossible that they could avoid seeing him, and he wondered what would happen when he was caught. They might be guards from the *White King*, neglecting their duties, he realised. In fact, that seemed the most likely explanation of the whole business.

It was nerve-racking to lie there, fearing a light at any moment, and the subsequent discovery. He could see his dreams of the expedition disappearing, and he was almost prepared to take a chance, and rush from the barn. But the men were standing in the doorway now, apparently undecided what to do. A single move would mean discovery.

And then one of the fellows, his voice hoarse, spoke quickly.

"It's all right now, Grice. Let's have the light."

CHAPTER III

NIGHT ENCOUNTER

Jim Penfold almost stopped breathing as the words came, and he stared fixedly towards the door, almost frightened that the light would shine directly on him when it came. But there was no need for fear immediately. The beam, when it stabbed through the darkness, shone towards the far end of the barn.

The corner where Jim was lying was still in total darkness, although he could see the two men clearly enough in the glow of the light.

His lips tightened.

One thing was certain: they were not guards. Both of them looked tough, rough-and-ready specimens, more like tramps than anything else. But they were better dressed than the men who walked the roads, and the man who had spoken had a well-educated voice. Yet there was something sinister as well as mysterious in their presence here.

The man with the light spoke next.

"O.K., Pete. What do we do now?"

"Just wait for the Boss." The man addressed as Pete laughed softly. "It's three o'clock, and he won't be much longer, or there'll be no time."

"Everything prepared?" asked the man named Grice.

"Yep—all ready." Pete laughed again. "And won't there be some shocks in the morning!"

Jim waited tensely, trying to gather the drift of the remarks. He was more sure than ever now that there was something sinister and menacing in the presence of the two men. What did they mean by saying "everything was prepared"? And what manner of shocks would come in the morning?

He glanced about him, almost desperately, but he knew there was no chance at all of getting away. He had to wait there, and he dreaded what would happen if he wanted to sneeze. That thought passed through his mind when his nose tickled, and he had to press his lips tightly. But the worry of that soon disappeared, for the man named Pete—obviously the leader of these two—went on again.

"The insurance company won't like it, Grice, that's a fact."

"Nope. Nor would I, if I had to pay ten thousand quid out, and I reckon you wouldn't neither."

"No-o. It seems almost a pity that a thing like that's got to go up in smoke."

Once again silence fell over the barn, but Jim's breathing was faster now, and there was horror in his heart. For he could not fail to understand what they meant now.

There was a plan on foot to set fire to the *White King*!

Jim knew that the flying boat had been insured for ten thousand pounds, and it was obvious that they were talking of it. His lips tightened as he realised the strange truth. By coming here he had learned something of a vile plot to wipe the flying boat off the face of the earth, before the expedition started!

It seemed almost impossible, but Jim did not waste time in telling himself that it could not be happening. It *was* happening. These fellows were waiting for their Boss, whoever he was, before starting for the aerodrome and the monster of the skies which was waiting, fully loaded, for the start of the great flight.

But why on earth should this thing be happening?

Who could possibly want to stop the flight, the start of a great expedition of scientific interest? There seemed no sense at all in it, and Jim's mind could not fathom the depths of the intrigue. There was one thing, however, so plain that he could not fail to see it clearly.

They were going to try and destroy the *White King*, and whatever happened he must stop that.

It was even more imperative now that he avoided discovery, and that he managed to escape. But it occurred to him that his best plan was to wait where he was until the Boss arrived. Then the two conspirators would have to leave the barn. He could follow, and raise the alarm. Once the guards were warned of coming trouble there would be nothing for him to worry about.

It did flash through his mind that this development might well stop the intended hiding in the luggage cabin, but he did not dwell on that. He lay there, his nerves taut, waiting to catch the slightest sound to warn him of the approach of the Boss.

He must have been there twenty minutes before any sound came.

In the meantime the two men had put the light out, and were lying in the straw at the other end of the barn. They heard the footsteps as soon as Jim, however, and he heard them rising, heard the straw crackling, as soft steps came from outside.

Then a hushed voice came:

"You there, Pete?"

"All ready, Boss!"

The light was switched on again, and in it Jim caught a glimpse of the man they called the Boss. He was a thick-set, swarthy-faced fellow, with a heavy black moustache. That was all Jim could see before the man turned, and the others climbed to their feet.

Any lingering doubt as to their intentions disappeared as the Boss said hoarsely:

"There are four guards, but one of them is waiting for our signal. He'll handle the others. We'll drill a hole in the petrol tank, and then set a fuse. It'll go up in smoke in ten minutes. You've got the drill, Pete?"

"Sure," said the man named Pete, "I've got that all right."

"Good. Come on then."

Jim was on tenterhooks now. In a few seconds the fellows would be out of the barn, and he would be able to slip out and bellow a warning to the guards. The fact that one of the men entrusted to look after the *White King* by night was a traitor made Jim's blood boil. But he did not think there would be any need to fear the consequences if all of them were alarmed at once, and the chances of the conspirators making a surprise attack were destroyed.

The man named Grice took a long stride towards the door of the barn. As he went, he switched out the light. The others crowded after him, and for the first time Jim felt that he was able to breathe easily. He actually started to get to his feet——

And then the thing happened.

Grice dropped the electric torch. With a muttered imprecation, he turned round to pick it up. At the same moment Pete, confounding the other for his clumsiness, shone the light of another, smaller torch.

It was more than enough, however, for the three crooks to see the lad!

He was on his hands and knees, looking towards the door, and the light shone clearly on his startled face. With a cry of alarm, he made a dash for the door, but before he had travelled three steps the man named Grice whipped something from his right pocket.

"Stop still, or you're dead!"

There was no mistaking the meaning in those viciously-spoken words. Nor was there any mistaking the gun which appeared in Grice's right hand. Jim knew that if he refused to obey he would be shot without mercy. His face was white and his lips set tensely as he came to a standstill.

Pete spoke next.

"A nice little earful you got, my boy, and you'll wish you hadn't! Put your hands up!"

Once again Jim obeyed, for it was the only thing he could do. But now he felt a terrible fear and hopelessness. He knew, from the conversation that he had overheard, that these men were desperate, criminals who were likely to stop at nothing to get what they wanted. The expressions on their faces confirmed that, too.

Jim stood absolutely still, arms above his head, wondering what would happen next. He was afraid—more afraid than he had ever been in his life before. And the words that came softly, sibilantly, from the lips of the swarthy-faced Boss did nothing to relieve him of his fear.

"Well, well, well! If it isn't Penfold's son! That is what I call good fortune!"

Jim had no idea what the other meant, but at the words a new fear shivered through him. The man Pete spoke quickly, however, and explained a great deal.

"Penfold's son! It couldn't be better, Boss! We'll take him with us——"

"And hold him for ransom," smiled the Boss, but there was nothing at all pleasant in his expression. Jim believed that he had never seen a man look so sinister and so evil.

But even then words were rushing through his mind.

Why should it be good fortune for them to have a chance of kidnapping him? Why should they hold him for ransom? Why——

Jim stopped thinking, but for one unavoidable fact. These men were planning to destroy the *White King* because for some reason they were enemies of his father! It was a discovery that by itself would have been more than enough to unsteady him, and as it was he could only stand and stare at the trio of ugly crooks, and the gun in Grice's hand.

They were absolutely silent for what seemed a long time, but was actually only a few seconds. Then the Boss spoke again, and there was unpleasant mockery in his voice.

"All right, Master Penfold, let's have a chat! What are you doing here?"

Jim did not answer, and Pete interrupted.

"It's getting on for four, Boss, and we haven't much time."

"We've got time for this," snapped the swarthy man, and Jim could not help noticing that Pete dropped back a step or two, looking thoroughly scared. So the Boss was really the leader, and the others were afraid of him. That seemed certain.

"Talk, you little whelp!" snapped the Boss, and he took two steps forward, his fist raised. "What were you doing here?"

Jim's heart was like lead, but he did not answer. He did not propose to do anything that would hasten the moment when he would be knocked unconscious—for that, he was sure, would happen. And at the last minute he promised himself to shout at the top of his voice, risking a bullet, risking his very life in an effort to raise the alarm, and stop the *White King* from being destroyed!

"Speak!" growled the Boss, and this time he helped his words with a vicious blow that took Jim on the jaw, and sent him staggering backwards. The lad gasped, and for a moment he was tempted to fling himself at the swarthy crook. He might have done so but for the fact that Grice stepped forward, ostentatiously showing his gun.

Jim's jaw was painful where the blow had struck, but he stuck to his guns.

"I'm not talking!" he said, as calmly as he could, but his legs and arms were trembling.

The swarthy man sneered, and he looked more evil than ever—a fellow who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted, and he wanted Jim to speak.

"You aren't, eh? We'll soon see about that!"

As he spoke he darted his right hand forward, and grabbed Jim's wrist. A moment later he twisted viciously, and a twinge of pain shot along Jim's arm. The lad winced once, but then his teeth tightened against each other, and he forced himself to keep silent. But the pain was agonising, and there was a bead of sweat on his forehead.

The swarthy man kept twisting, slowly, cruelly, as he talked:

"If you know what's good for you, Penfold, you'll speak. This is nothing to what I can do. And if you don't talk, I'll break your arm!"

It was a horrible threat, and the worst of it was that Jim knew that the crook meant it. Every ounce of courage he possessed was stirred, and he wanted to defy the man, to tell him to do his worst. But he suddenly realised that there could be no harm in telling some sort of story, even though he did not stick to the whole truth. He gasped aloud:

"All right, I'll tell you!"

The Boss's pressure on his arm relaxed.

"Get it going, then!"

"I—I was waiting here to see the start of the flight," Jim muttered. "My father sent me up to Doncaster last night, but I didn't want to miss anything, so I came here."

"Wanted you to go to Doncaster did he?" The news seemed to please the swarthy man. "All right, my cockalorum, you'll wish you'd been an obedient son before this is finished. Grice——"

Jim saw what was coming as the gunman took a step towards him, the gun upraised club-fashion. They were going to knock him out. Now was the moment when he must shout, must do everything possible to raise the alarm.

His lips opened, the words actually started to come, when the voice came from the door.

It was sharp and incisive, yet somehow familiar, and the words brought a flood of relief to Jim's mind.

"Put your hands up, all of you! Drop that gun or I'll shoot!"

CHAPTER IV

TABLES TURNED

There was a startled silence in the barn as the words honed out, and Jim was as surprised as any of the others. The Boss turned round, with his hands in the air, and Grice swung on his heel. Nearer the door, the man named Pete was trying to pierce the darkness, and his face was working.

All three crooks had their hands up now, and the voice came again.

"That's right. Now turn round."

For the first time Jim realised who the newcomer was, and he could have shouted with joy, although he was a long way from understanding just what had happened, and why the other was armed. But Buster Howell, his fellow stowaway to be, was there! His figure was just discernible in the gloom.

It was then that Jim saw the man Grice—whose gun was in his hand above his head—moving his fingers so as to get a grip on the gun. The Boss started to turn round and Pete followed suit, although reluctantly, but Grice did not move.

"Turn round!" snapped Buster Howell, "or——"

"You little runt!" cried Grice, "you ain't got no gun!"

As he spoke, the gunman had his fingers about the butt of his automatic, and one was on the trigger. At the same moment Jim realised the truth. Buster was not armed, he was bluffing!

Another two seconds might have altered the whole complexion of the affair, but in them Jim Penfold acted, moving more quickly than he had ever moved before. He literally hurled himself at Grice, his hands outstretched. Before the bullet could spit from the gun, Jim had his hand about it. Grice drove a terrific right arm punch towards him, but the blow missed, and Jim had the gun!

At the same moment, Buster Howell came through the door like a streak of lightning. He leapt at the Boss, whose right hand had moved quickly towards his pocket, and he sent the fellow flying to the straw-covered floor. At the same second, Jim drew back a couple of paces, Grice's gun in his hand, and his voice taut.

"*I've* got a gun! Hands up!"

This time there was no doubting the way the tables had turned. In the dim light from the torch—on the floor now—Jim could see Grice and Pete hanging back, afraid of the gun in his hand, and the Boss half-conscious on the floor. Buster was bending over him, and taking an automatic from his pocket. He straightened up, and looked at Jim with a smile.

"Our trick, I think! Well done, Jim. Now—what are we going to do with these gentlemen?"

He was pointing his gun towards the others as he spoke, and there was no fear of reprisals. It occurred suddenly to Jim that Pete might also be armed, and he stepped forward, keeping the man covered as he did so. He patted the fellow's pockets, and soon found what he was looking for. Not until his object was achieved did he answer Buster's question.

"One of us had better go for the police, I think."

Buster hesitated, but at the word "police" Grice spoke. His voice was altogether different now. There was none of the bullying bluster that there had been before. It was whining, and to the lads disgusting.

"Listen, don't do that, sons! We don't mean no 'arm——"

"Shut up!" snapped Buster contemptuously. "You meant harm all right, and if we decide on the police, nothing you can say will stop us!"

"But, sonny——"

"Shut up!" bellowed Buster, and his manner was enough this time to send the cowardly crook back a pace, his face working. Jim, by this time, had picked up a torch and was shining it so that all three men were in excellent view.

"What's the objection against the police?" he asked Buster in a low voice.

Buster grinned a little.

"If we go for 'em, our chance of stowing away is busted. I don't like the idea of that at all."

Jim hesitated. He could see what the other was thinking, and in a way he agreed. On the other hand, it seemed madness not to put these fellows in the hands of the police. There was some mystery, concerned with his father, which had to be thrashed out, and the police were the obvious people to do it. He was by no means happy about the whole situation, for it seemed to him that his father was in danger of some kind.

"What did you hear?" he asked.

"Everything," said Buster quietly. "And naturally you want to find out what their game is. Well—let's ask 'em. We can probably make that cringing fellow talk, if not the others, and if we learn a bit we'll know whether it's wise to take a chance or not. And remember this, Jim, your father is probably taking care of himself——"

"He started for America last night," said Jim quickly.

Buster whistled, and his eyes gleamed.

"Then there's no need to worry about him at the moment," he said. "Look here, let's get busy. Will you talk, or shall I? Whoever asks the questions had better watch 'em with a gun, and the other start tying 'em up. They'll need tying up whatever we decide to do."

"That's an idea," said Jim Penfold. "Well, you're a much better talker than I am, so I'll do the tying. What about some rope?"

"Probably you'll have to use their ties," said Buster Howell, who managed to behave as though he was thoroughly used to emergencies of this kind.

Jim kept his ears open as he set about his task. He started with a zest, chiefly from the effect of his relief at having been able to turn the tables as they had done. He did not realise that he was taking the whole affair very well, and that many youngsters of his own age would have been so flabbergasted by what had happened that they would have been unable to think sensibly or act at all.

True, his mind was in a whirl. So many things had happened, but of paramount importance there was the fact that these three men were in some way working against his father. The feeling of distrust he had had in the older man did not disappear, but it paled into insignificance when compared with these latest developments.

Somehow or other he had to warn his father, and the more information that could be gathered from the three crooks who were so completely in their power, the better it would be.

It seemed strange that three desperate men, armed as they had been, could have been outwitted by the two youngsters. But in Buster Howell and Jim Penfold there were a brace of lads who could hold their own with most people.

Moreover, the affairs of the night had made Jim older than he was in years. It had given him also a sense of responsibility that would never be lost again. He felt tense with excitement and yet was forcing himself to keep cool as, with Buster holding the three crooks up at the point of the gun, he relieved Pete of his necktie and belt, and started to make a good job of tying the man's hands and wrists.

Meanwhile Buster was talking. There was a hard note in the youngster's voice, and he certainly seemed much older than his years.

"Now, Grice, start talking if you know what's good for you. Spill the whole story, and I might think of refusing to go to the police—this time!"

Grice's little eyes darted to and fro. But before he could speak, the Boss snapped out:

"Let a word pass, Grice, and I'll kill you!"

The words obviously scared the crook, but Buster turned on the Boss with a sudden ferocity.

"Hold your tongue! You're in a fine position to talk about killing, aren't you? You'll have the handcuffs round your wrists before your much older, whatever happens to Grice. Now"—he turned again to the gunman—"you've got just a chance—talk!"

Pete, his hands fastened behind his back, was staring wildly into Jim's face, but he whipped out a vile oath as Grice started.

"Grice, half a word, and——"

"Shut up!" shouted Buster, and he took half a step towards the man Jim was tying up. Pete stopped talking, but Jim realised with his new friend that the only man who might talk was Grice.

The gunman looked nervously from Pete to the Boss, and then muttered:

"I don't know much, I swear I don't! I'm one o' Pete's men—he hires me to do his jobs for him——"

"What's his other name?" snapped Buster.

"Morgan, Pete Morgan——"

"And the name of the Boss?"

Grice turned colour, and Buster guessed what he was going to say. Moreover, he believed the words when they came.

"I don't know, I swear I don't! Pete never tells me who he's working for——"

"I know I can't trust you, you cowardly dog!" snapped Pete. "I——"

"That's more than enough from you," said Jim Penfold, and he knocked the speaker's knees forward. Pete lost his balance, and would have fallen heavily to the ground, but Jim saved him from the fall, lowered him gently, and then fastened his belt securely about his ankles. Pete was trussed up as completely as a chicken in a few seconds. Meanwhile Grice was still talking.

"We was going to fire the *White King*, that's the truth! The Boss has got it in for Penfold——"

"You mean Sir Arthur?" snapped Buster.

"Yep, but I don't know why, I swear I don't!"

Buster shrugged his shoulders. He believed that he knew now all that the man could tell him, and like Jim he did not think there was much chance of forcing either of the others to speak. By this time Jim had tied the Boss's hands behind him, and was now doing the same to his ankles.

Grice was quickly trussed up, and to complete the job, Buster took each man's handkerchief, and stuffed it into his mouth. None of the trio of crooks could move or speak, a highly satisfactory state of affairs to the two youngsters.

"Now let's get out," Buster whispered to Jim. "We'll tell 'em we might send for the police, and we might come back ourselves."

He suited the action to the words, but it was impossible to see the expressions on the faces of the three crooks. With a light laugh, Buster stepped outside the barn, and Jim extinguished the lights before following him. They walked softly until they reached a point ten yards from the barn. Then Buster stopped.

"Good work!" he chuckled. "I was scared that my bluff had failed, but you timed your jump nicely. A pretty bunch of crooks, aren't they?"

"I wish to goodness I knew why they were after my father," said Jim worriedly. "I don't like it, Buster."

"I'll bet you don't! But look here, Jim, I don't see that we need scotch our own plans. Here's an idea. I've an old envelope and paper in my pocket, and a stamp. We'll write a note to the police, telling them the three are in the barn, and that there was an attempt to fire the *White King*. We needn't say who we are, or where we've gone. We can tell 'em that there is talk of going for your father, and then they'll be warned. How does that strike you?"

"It's an idea," admitted Jim slowly, and his heart leapt. The last thing he wanted to do was to miss the flight, although he would have done so had no other way presented itself of getting information to the police. He nodded at last. "Yes, we'll do it!"

"Fine! Now let's get a letter written!" exclaimed Buster. "It can't be helped if Grice is caught as well, because if we released him he would only untie the others, so he's just unlucky. He didn't tell us much more than we knew already, anyhow."

Jim said nothing. The other took some crumpled notepaper from his pocket, and started to write the letter to the police, in pencil. He gave the position of the barn, stated what he had heard, and his fears for Sir Arthur Penfold. Then he sealed the missive in an envelope, and attached a stamp.

"That will reach the police about the same time that the *White King's* on its way," he said with a chuckle. "Grice and his precious companions will be well-looked after, and we'll be away! Now, there's a post-box at the main gates of the aerodrome, isn't there?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then I'll hop down and post this, while you keep by the gap and make sure the coast is clear. Remember, old boy, we've got three guns between us now, so we're a fairly strong attacking force! You all right?"

"Fit as a fiddle!" Jim assured him.

"Fine! I'll be back in half an hour, and it'll be time to move then. I hope that luggage-room is comfortable!"

CHAPTER V

ABOARD!

JIM PENFOLD had forgotten, as well as Buster Howell, that one of the four guards at the *White King* was in the pay of the man who was called the Boss. Had they remembered it they might have decided on a different course of action, but as it happened they had nothing to worry about.

The man had a definite plan. He was to start to work when he heard the hoot of an owl repeated three times, and nothing but that signal would start him on an attack against the other guards. Moreover, he had been told that the attack, if it came, would be over by four o'clock, and it was nearly five before he heard the sound that put him, and the others, on the *qui vive.*

It was little enough—just as though a stone had been kicked by a careless foot. All four guards put their hands to their pockets and their guns, and tried to pierce the gloom. No other sound came for several seconds, however, and all of them were convinced that it was a rabbit or a fox, venturing close to the flying boat, when the second sound came.

This time it was the definite noise of a footstep, near the tail of the *White King.* The guard there raised his voice.

"Who's there?"

No sound came through the darkness now. Jim Penfold, waiting less than twenty yards away, held his breath. Some distance from him was Buster Howell, and Buster had several heavy stones in his hand.

As the sentry advanced a couple of paces, Buster acted.

He hurled first one stone and then another towards the front of the *White King*. Immediately the guard at the tail swung round, and four voices broke the silence.

"There's someone there in front!"

"Two of us after him!" ordered another man. "Two by the engines!"

The words had hardly fallen from his lips before another stone skidded along the ground, and two guards plunged forward, their torches sending out long stabs of white light. But they were directed towards the front of the *White King*, and the engines—the most vulnerable part of a 'plane.

In one way luck was with the youngsters.

Normally a 'plane of any size would be in its hangar, but the abnormally wide wing spread of the *White King* had made it difficult to get the bus inside a shed, and for the night—for that matter for the past week—the machine had been left outside the hangars, with an ample guard. Thus there was no door to force in order to get at the flying boat.

Buster had realised this, and he had planned everything else perfectly.

The two remaining guards were concentrating their light on the three great engines, where the damage was likely to come, and the others were searching for the people they believed to be in front of the flying boat. But they would not be on that wild goose chase for long, the lads realised.

Buster reached Jim in a flash.

"Now's our chance. Make a dash for it, Jim!"

To make sure that their approach was noiseless, they had taken off their shoes, and were hurrying over the grass-covered ground in their stockings. Hardly a sound came as they reached the tail of the *White King*. And now, Jim realised, was the worst moment.

For they had to get the door open.

If it was locked, it might prove impossible. On the other hand there was no reason to suspect that it would be locked, for there was nothing inside the luggage compartment likely to be stolen. That was the thing in which the lads placed their hopes—and their hopes were justified!

The door opened as Jim grabbed the handle and turned it. Buster leapt on to the step, and went inside, feeling his way through the tense darkness. Jim, seeing the white lights of the torches darting to and fro, felt a dreadful fear lest they would be turned on him before he had entered and closed the door. But he knew that it would be madness to hurry too much, and thus kick up some kind of a noise that would warn the guards immediately.

He worked quickly but not carelessly. One step up to the luggage cabin, a step forward into that pitch darkness, a turn on his heel so that he could pull the door to.

"All right," he muttered a second later. "We're through!"

It was true. He had closed the door with hardly a sound, and now the two of them were crouching there, with the luggage of the great expedition. For a few seconds they rested, both breathing hard. There were ventilators in the cabin, and they could hear the mutter of voices outside. Once footsteps came perilously close, and they held their breath.

But the guard passed the door, and took up his position at the tail of the *White King*. For the first time Jim felt that they were really safe.

"Dare we show a light?" he demanded *sotto voce*.

"Keep it shining towards the floor, then it won't show through the ventilators," said Buster.

Jim obeyed, switching on a torch so that the wide circle of dazzling white light shone on the floor of their cabin. It cast a glow sufficient for them to see about them, and Buster uttered a soft chuckle.

"There's plenty of room at the back there, and some canvas. If we can get behind that, we're as safe as houses. Let's get going."

Still shining the light downwards, they moved towards the rear of the compartment. It was roomy enough, and they were able to stand upright. All about them was the tackle and provisions for the flight, and as Buster said, there was a clear space right at the back of the compartment, where some of the impedimenta was covered with canvas.

The canvas was loose. Pulling it aside, they crept beneath it, and to their relief they found that there were two wooden cases against the wall.

"Seats provided!" chuckled Buster, who did not seem to be in the least perturbed by the situation, and whose voice was filled with elation. "It was made for stowaways, Jim!"

"I hope they don't suddenly decide to look through the place before they start." Jim did not say so in so many words, but he was feeling more than a little nervous.

Buster chuckled again.

"The worst that can happen is that we'll be found," he said, "and we can't expect everything our way. But I've got a feeling that we're going to be successful. Haven't you?"

"When we take off I'll agree with you," muttered Jim. "Oh, it's good to sit down! Devilish dark, though."

"It'll be all right in daylight. The light will come through the ventilators, and we'll even be able to read. What have you brought in that case?"

"Two thermos flasks of tea, and some sandwiches," said Jim. "What have you brought?"

"Apples and chocolate," said Buster, "so we've plenty of provisions for a couple of days, if need be. I've got half-a-dozen books, too.

No sense in having nothing at all to do, and we'll be pretty sick of each other by the time we dare show ourselves."

Jim chuckled, a ghostly sound in the darkness. "You think of most things, don't you?"

"It pays in the long run," said Buster. "But look here, we'll be wiser not to talk. Sound travels, sometimes. Think you can hold on for a bit?"

"Of course," agreed Jim Penfold, and silence fell over the cabin, a silence broken only by the occasional cough that came from the nearest guard. Jim realised very quickly that the other had been right. It would be dreadfully monotonous cooped up here for hours—for days!—on end. But the ultimate reward would be well worth it, and he did not feel worried. Certainly he did not feel bored yet, for the excitement kept him continually in the throes of anxiety.

Slowly grey dawn began to streak across the sky outside. The ghostly greyness made no apparent difference inside the luggage cabin at first, but gradually they realised it was getting lighter, and that during broad daylight they would at least be able to see. The light filtered through two ventilators built on either side, and through a thick, opaque glass window let in the roof of their temporary quarters.

"It'll do us fine," Buster said as he glanced at his watch after twenty minutes or so. "Half an hour to go before six o'clock, Jim. They'll be starting the engines soon!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there was a mutter of voices outside, and then Skipper Crane's deep voice, from close by. Jim jumped, and his heart was thumping fast.

"All quiet in the night, Hopkins?"

"Thought someone was fooling around once, but we caught no sign of 'em," said the guard named Hopkins.

"Good. No one left the 'plane, did they?"

"Smith and Wilkson went a few yards, while Dorkins and me looked after the engine," said Hopkins. "We didn't leave the old lady altogether, sir."

"That's good. Well, in half an hour we'll be off. Lucky in a way we've kept the time of departure fairly secret, there won't be many folk about." The Skipper's voice was silent for a few moments, and when it came again it was farther away. "All right, George, let's get the engines going. Mike, we'll load up the rest of the stuff right away."

Skipper Crane was as calm and unruffled as ever, despite the fact that he was starting on one of the most momentous trips ever made by air. The other members of the crew seemed just as happy, too. But Jim Penfold's blood was racing, his heart was beating faster than he had ever known it before. Buster, with the canvas pulled well in front of him now, was looking very tense.

This was the testing time.

Jim almost gasped aloud when the door of the luggage cabin was pulled open, and early morning sunlight streamed inside. There was the sound of a heavy footstep, a thump as something was dropped on the floor, and then the voice of George Ayling, one of the other pilots.

"Steady with that box, Hopkins, it's filled with instruments. How many more packages?"

"Three, sir."

"Big ones?"

"No, sir, not very big."

"That's all right, then. They can go in front of that canvas over there. Slip 'em through, will you?"

"Aye aye, sir," said Hopkins, and Jim Penfold almost stopped breathing, for he knew the only canvas was in front of them. If the man Hopkins thought of moving it and pushing the other three boxes behind it, they would be finished.

Seconds dragged like minutes, and there was an odd drumming in Jim's ears. There came the sound of heavy breathing, deadened footsteps, the squeaking noise as a box was pushed along the floor. Then suddenly the canvas in front of Jim moved, and a box—on the other side of the canvas—stubbed against his toe.

How he stopped himself from gasping he didn't know, but he managed it. His toe—he was still not wearing shoes—stung like blazes, but he could do nothing to ease it. He dared not move a fraction of an inch.

Then came relief!

For the engines of the *White King* began to turn, and their steady roar almost drowned the noise of Hopkins, moving about the cabin. Two other boxes were pushed against the canvas, but no further damage was done. Then Hopkins' voice, raised so that it rose above the noise of the engines, called out:

"That's the lot, sir!"

Skipper Crane was at hand again. He shouted back:

"All right! I'll come and have a look round, and make sure everything's fastened."

Jim and Buster had been unable to see that Hopkins was fastening the boxes to gadgets—little more than smoothed spikes—stuck in the floor. This was to make sure that nothing shifted while the *White King* was in the air. The fact that the Skipper was coming for a final look round almost made them stop breathing, and for the first time they wished the engines were silent. They would have been able to hear every sound, then.

As it was, the first intimation they had that the Skipper was near the canvas was when his hand suddenly appeared, within a foot of Jim's nose, as he grabbed at it for support. He had stubbed his foot on a box, and almost missed his footing.

They heard his words clearly.

"Confound the thing! Well, it all looks shipshape."

Silence, but for the roaring of the engines, came again. They heard nothing for perhaps three minutes, and then suddenly the sound of the engines lessened to a dull, monotonous hum. For a moment neither lad spoke. Then Buster Howell muttered with a gasp that revealed his own anxiety and excitement.

"He's shut the door. We're through!"

But even then Jim found it hard to believe that they had really succeeded. Not until they felt the *White King* moving would he be convinced that they had succeeded in their mad project. And the seconds dragged out, until the waiting and the suspense grew so much that he thought it would never end.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE AIR

THAT dull droning of the engines and the vibration as the *White King* shivered from nose to tail, were the only things to come to the minds of the crouching lads. They had been able to make themselves more comfortable now, but they almost prayed for the minutes to fly.

For at least the tenth time, Jim glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Three minutes to six," he muttered, his eyes gleaming. "If they're punctual, we'll be off any time!"

Buster nodded, for he could not force himself to speak. Every second seemed an age, and in both their minds was the fear that at the last moment something would happen to reveal them to the fliers.

And then suddenly the vibration seemed to get worse, and both Buster and Jim lurched forward a little. They sat absolutely rigid, eyeing each other, before Jim burst out:

"We're off!"

It was true! The *White King* was moving steadily forward, and the vibration was worse, because the wheels were running along the uneven surface of the ground. Then suddenly the vibration stopped altogether, and Jim knew what had happened.

"The take-off," he exclaimed; "we're in the air!"

And then, as the great flying boat winged its way towards the distant skies, they could only sit there with the canvas thrown back, and with a glow of excited satisfaction in their eyes.

. . . . .

In the cabin of the *White King* the six members of the expedition party sat quietly, happy that they had started to time, and that the long-discussed project was in operation at last.

Skipper Crane was at the controls, his rugged face set in a confident smile as he pulled back at the joystick. Thousands of feet beneath them the aerodrome looked like a little patch in a widespread quilt, and it was almost impossible for them to see the buildings of the Miller Flying Company.

None of them dreamed that but for the prompt action of two lads the *White King* would have been a blackened, charred mass of twisted metal. None of them suspected the mad idea that had enabled the lads to save the machine—and least of all did they suspect that they were carrying stowaways. Had it been suggested to the Skipper, he would have laughed. He could have understood a stowaway in a 'plane travelling from city to city, but for an expedition like this, headed for the frozen wastes of the North Pole, it seemed absurd.

Not that the thought occurred to him as he talked to George Ayling, his second-in-command, who was sitting on the dual control seat next to him.

"Queer that Penfold had to dash off last night, and didn't even see us off," he said. "I'm wondering whether he regrets the money he put into the flight, now."

"It's possible," admitted Ayling, a smaller man than the Skipper, with a cheery face, a snub-nose, blue eyes that usually twinkled merrily, and a mass of flaxen curls that had always been his despair. "However, I was sorrier for the young 'un."

"I'm with you there," piped up one of the men sitting in a comfortable cabin seat behind the pilots. This was a tall, thin, bearded man, dressed in a suit of khaki drill that seemed to flap about him. Professor Ray was one of the foremost scientists in the field of research for the Arctic regions, and he had been in many expeditions to the North and South Poles, although this was his first venture by air. "Do you know, Skip, I have fancied Penfold to be worried lately."

"I've thought the same thing," admitted the Skipper. "However, we aren't likely to know the reason for it for some months. Let's talk about other things. With any luck, Professor, we'll be at St. John's, Newfoundland, in eighteen hours. The weather's set fair, according to the latest news."

"Excellent, excellent." Professor Ray pulled at his thick brown beard, and then apparently lost himself in contemplation of the land over which they were flying.

A more perfect morning for the flight could not have been imagined. They had been in the air twenty minutes now, and it was broad daylight. From the east the brilliant sun was doing its best to bathe the whole world in a golden glory, and there was no cloud in the deep blue sky.

They were flying almost due west, over Hampshire and Wiltshire, towards the Devon coast. Then they would cross Ireland, and soon the lapping waves of the mighty Atlantic would be beneath them, a wide expanse of water that would stretch for nearly two thousand miles, without a known island from Ireland to Newfoundland.

All the members of the official crew of the *White King* felt more than satisfied at the way the flight had started.

Besides the Skipper, George Ayling and Professor Ray, there were three other members of the expedition party. Dr. Humbolt was a short, stoutish man, clean-shaven, and with a miserable looking mouth. He was a surprise to most of the other members of the party, who did not know him well. For he looked thoroughly depressing, the type of companion who would do nothing but grouse and grumble, whether things were right or wrong. In fact he was a cheerful soul, the spirit of optimism pervaded all his thoughts, and he was proved to be the man most likely to raise hopes when all hope seemed lost.

It was true that his appearance was against him, for his rather heavy face was surmounted with a short crop of iron grey hair, that looked as though it had been growing from a head completely shaved. To add to his unusualness, he wore a pair of thick-lensed *pince-nez* glasses, that pinched the bridge of his nose tightly, and with which he was perpetually fiddling. Like the Professor, Dr. Humbolt was clad in khaki drill, and it seemed odd to find that he was not wearing a tie, and that a little patch of white dimpled skin showed at the V of his shirt.

The sixth member of the party that was prepared to risk its life in the frozen wastes of the North Pole, was a short, little man, whose miserable expression easily matched that of Dr. Humbolt's. He was the only real mechanic on board the flying boat, although, like the Skipper, George Ayling and Ken Wright, the fifth member of the crew, he possessed a full pilot's certificate, and the Skipper knew that he was one of the most reliable men imaginable at the controls.

There was one reason why he would always be called a mechanic—and that was his accent. Bert Chase was a veritable Cockney of Cockneys. His aitches simply lost themselves completely when they were wanted, and appeared in all manner of strange places. But he was a clever mechanic, a fine pilot and, despite his apparent glumness, he was actually a cheerful soul. Everyone but Professor Ray knew him well.

Such were the members—or the official members—of the Arctic Flight Expedition party, whose story was even now being read on the breakfast tables of Great Britain, and reports of whose progress would be circulated throughout the whole of the known world.

The object of the flight was simply to discover more about the conditions at the North Pole, and also to find more about the habits and customs of the Esquimau races who lived nearer the Pole than anyone else. The Professor was the official leader, in that respect, although Dr. Humbolt had also had a wide experience in Polar exploration, and apart from being the official medical man of the party, he would be able to give the Professor a great deal of help.

For an hour the great machine winged its way across the skies. They had left England behind for some time, and now they were flying over that lovely south-western corner of the Emerald Isle. Ahead of them the blue Atlantic twinkled with a myriad of little lights atop the waves—the effect of the sun that was shining down to give them such an auspicious start.

Skipper broke the silence at last.

"Everything's going fine," he said. "The engines seem to be perfect—better even than I'd hoped. Do you know how fast we're travelling, Professor?"

Professor Ray, always a little absent-minded, looked up with a start.

"Fast, fast?" It was the only word that he had caught. "No, I never eat breakfast, Captain Crane!"

There was a chuckle of laughter at the Professor's expense, and he nodded affably when he understood why. Soon a general discussion started on various items connected with their flight, and for the men in the cabin, bent on the future, little dreaming of the two lads separated only by a wall of steel from them, the flight was pleasant and comfortable. The *White King*—shortened by most of them to the *King* before long—was travelling smoothly, for there was hardly a breath of wind, and no sign of any to come.

In the words of Skipper Crane, it was set fair.

. . . . .

On the other side of that steel wall, two youngsters regarded each other from time to time with a half smile that said a great deal. As the minutes had flown after the start of the flight they had been relieved, for even then they had not been able to believe that they were really off.

At the end of half an hour, however, they realised that there was not the slightest fear of them being discovered until the flying boat reached Newfoundland, and Buster had chuckled aloud with glee.

"We're absolutely on velvet!" he assured Jim. "When we get to St. John's they'll be so anxious to get on the next stage of the flight after refuelling that they'll not think of looking for us.

Where's the second calling place? Do you know?"

"They'll be aiming for a trading post on Baffin Island," said Jim, who knew the itinerary of the flight off by heart. "There's plenty of petrol and fresh foodstuff waiting for them there."

"And that'll be the place where we disclose ourselves," said Buster. "Do you know, I'm glad you're with me."

"It would have been lonely by yourself," admitted Jim.

"I didn't mean that, old son. I mean that when the Skipper sees you, he'll not be so wild as he would have been if I'd been alone."

Jim smiled, a little ruefully.

"I wouldn't be so sure. He's pretty stiff on discipline, I'm told. Anyhow," he added with a laugh, "we'll have part of the adventure, and there'll be getting back to England from wherever they do throw us out."

"Cheerful! They'll take us with 'em," prophesied Buster.

"I'm not so sure," said Jim, "but you needn't be afraid but that I'll do everything I can to persuade them. Gee! I wish we'd some cushions!"

"We're not so badly off," said Buster. "Have an apple, it'll cheer you up."

Jim hardly knew why an apple would cheer him up. For that matter he was feeling a tremendous excitement, and he knew that he would never forget this day no matter what happened in the future. It was only natural that he should feel some misgivings about what would happen when they revealed themselves, but at least there was no need to fear anything in that direction for some time. Another sixteen hours, he reckoned, providing the passage was smooth.

He did not let himself think any further ahead than that.

He had done a great deal of flying, one way and another, for his father had encouraged him in that direction, and he held a pilot's licence, although he was not yet old enough to fly solo. The day of his eighteenth birthday, however, he would apply for a solo licence, and he knew that he would be able to pass the necessary tests without any trouble.

His knowledge of the air made him realise what would happen should they strike a patch of bad weather.

Everything would be fine and comfortable while they were flying as smoothly as they were now. In fact they might have been in a small room for all the movement they felt, excepting when now and again the flying boat dipped or climbed. Then they lurched forward a little, but they had suffered no kind of damage. In a storm, however, they would be thrown here, there and everywhere, and they would be lucky to get away with no more than a few nasty bangs and bruises.

Jim had realised all that when he had decided to take the risk, however, and that did not worry him. Now, as he tried to read out of the paper-backed books that Buster had thoughtfully provided, he could not do so. His mind kept travelling ahead, and he was hoping against hope that whatever happened they would not be turned back once they were discovered.

And yet—the Skipper would be a firm disciplinarian. He was sure of that. Anyhow, time would tell.

Time flew quickly, as it happened, for strangely enough Jim found himself immersed in the book, a thriller that rapidly got into its stride. When he finished it—after eating one of the sandwiches he had provided, and taking a sip or two of tea—he saw Buster smiling at him.

"How's the time?" Buster asked.

Jim glanced quickly at his wrist-watch.

"By Jove! Eleven o'clock! We've come nearly a thousand miles already!"

"Flying right over the Atlantic," chuckled Buster, "and probably the first stowaways to do so. We'll be in the news, Jim! Now I wonder——"

Then he stopped very suddenly.

He had pulled back the canvas that had sheltered them as soon as the aeroplane had started off, but after staring for a second at the wall of the luggage compartment opposite them, he whipped the canvas across them again. Jim had seen what was happening, too, and his face blanched.

The door, leading from the cabin-proper to the luggage compartment, was opening slowly!

One of the men from the party was coming in, perhaps to examine some part of their luggage, perhaps to get some provisions of some kind. Neither lad really knew why they had taken it for granted that no one would come in until they had landed. Now the shock of this seemed to paralyse them both, and they heard the door open, and the voices from the cabin, like two lads carved from stone.

Was discovery imminent? Or would they be lucky again?

CHAPTER VII

TAKEN TO TASK

THERE was an odd little smile curving the corners of Skipper Crane's mouth as he relinquished the controls after three hours' flying, to George Ayling. For some time he had chatted with the Professor, while the other members of the crew had been reading or—in the case of Bert Chase, preparing sandwiches and drink for lunch.

The *White King* had been built with a view to all requirements, and like the big air liners that regularly served the routes across the more civilized continents, it was fitted with a small compartment where food was stored, and where practically anything could be cooked on the electric stove.

Bert Chase was the general factotum, and he was, moreover, an excellent cook. That was the reason he had been brought with the party. He could turn his hand to anything, and inside that rather frail-looking body there was the courage of a lion.

The Skipper suddenly turned the talk to stowaways!

He was speaking to Bert, and smiling cheerfully, making sure that no one took his words too seriously.

"You know, Bert, you're just the kind of fellow likely to stow away on ocean liners, aren't you? Ever done anything like that?"

Bert looked aggrieved.

"I've always bin an'nonest man, Skip, and you knows it."

"Oh, there's nothing dishonest about a stowaway, surely?"

"Only that he never pays no fare!" snapped the Cockney.

"That's a point," admitted the Skipper. "But I always have a sneaking sympathy for them. They put up with a dickens of a lot just to get from one country to another."

"Knew a man," said the Professor abruptly, "who stowed away on a fishing boat. Got buried underneath the fish. Nearly dead when they pulled him out, poor fellow."

The Skipper's eyes narrowed.

"You look as though you have some sympathy for them too, Professor."

"Always sympathetic towards suffering human beings," said the Professor sharply. "Hope you are, too!"

"I try to be," chuckled the Skipper. "What's your opinion of stowaways, Doctor?"

Dr. Humbolt's eyes twinkled, although his glasses hid that fact.

"Good luck to 'em, Skipper, good luck to 'em! More nuisance than they're worth most of the time. Find 'em something to do, though, and they're usually happy."

That odd little smile was still twitching the Skipper's lips as he regarded Bert Chase.

"I suppose you'd just throw them overboard, Bert?"

"I'd tell 'em I was going to," said Bert gloomily. "Maybe I would if they grew saucy. But what a subjick to talk abart 'ere. There ain't no chance in a million of there being any of 'em aboard, Skip—Captain Crane, I mean."

George Ayling chuckled from the pilot's seat. Next to him, Wright seemed to be asleep, his lanky figure sprawling over the seat.

"You'd be surprised what they do and where they get to. There was a stowaway on board an Imperial Airways Liner once, when I was piloting it. A youngster of about eighteen, one of the nicest lads I've ever met. Had a queer name like Crasher, or Banger or something, and said he always crashed into places. He was left at Bombay, where it was said he had some relatives, and I often wondered what became of him."

"Why'd he do it?" demanded the Professor sharply.

"He wanted to see the world," chuckled George Ayling.

"And a very praiseworthy notion," admitted the Professor.

The Skipper was still smiling oddly to himself as he stood up and stepped to the door leading to the luggage compartment. As he reached it, he said thoughtfully, "I'm just going to make sure everything's still shipshape. I won't be a moment."

And he opened the door and stepped into the gloomy compartment beyond.

. . . . . .

Forcing himself against the wall as well as he could, Jim Penfold hardly dared to breathe as he heard the man who had entered the compartment approaching the canvas sheet. Jim could hardly hear his own breathing, and certainly he heard nothing of Buster's, who was sitting as still as a graven image.

For perhaps five minutes the Skipper poked about the cabin. Once he banged into the canvas, and Jim's nose suffered. Again the youngster had to bite hard to prevent himself from crying out, and his eyes watered dreadfully.

Then the footsteps seemed to be getting further away.

Jim drew a deep breath of relief—and it was hardly out when the Skipper came close to the canvas again, and pulled it aside!

Jim sat there, staring at the pilot, his face a picture of dismay. Buster Howell looked as bad. Neither of them had ever had such a shock in their lives—and nor, it seemed, had the Skipper.

He stood there staring down on them, his expression comical—or what would have been comical had the youngsters been able to appreciate it more. But they were so startled and so tremendously disappointed that they could think of nothing but the thing that had happened.

They were found!

For perhaps twenty seconds the Skipper was staring down at them. Then he drew a deep breath, and his voice echoed cavernously round the luggage-room.

"Well, well, well! *Two* of you! Great Scott, it doesn't seem possible!"

Still neither Jim nor Buster could speak. For once Buster's *sang froid* deserted him, and he was as tongue-tied as Jim.

From the cabin came the Professor's high-pitched voice, to show that he was not always as absent-minded as he chose to pretend.

"Two of what, Skipper?"

"Two young gentlemen!" said Captain Crane heavily. "The kind we were discussing a little while back. So you're on board, Jim Penfold!"

"I——" began Jim helplessly. "I——"

"Penfold? Young Penfold?" The Professor's spidery body seemed to fill the doorway. "But this—this is preposterous. Preposterous! What are you doing here, James?"

"I——" began Jim again, but he could not find the words. He would never have believed it possible to be so startled and so tongue-tied. Not since his early pranks at school had he been so stuck for words.

If he and Buster were taken aback, however, the rest of the crew of the *White King* were just as startled. Three faces were crowded in the doorway now, behind the Professor. Dr. Humbolt's glasses had fallen, but he was staring aghast at the stowaways. Ken Wright had awakened after all, and he was towering above the others, while Bert Chase just stared, stupefied, at the apparition of two dirty, dishevelled, startled youngsters who were sitting on two boxes and looking as though they did not know where to put their faces.

The Skipper seemed to recover at last.

"Well, well! You're here, so you'd better come and answer for yourselves. You first, Jim Penfold. And—who is your companion?"

Jim did not speak. He walked past the Skipper, and the men crowded in the doorway made room for him. Buster followed, and he had apparently recovered something of that easy nonchalance which seemed so strange in a youngster of his age.

"My name's Howell, sir, and the blame is entirely mine. I——"

"No, that's not true!" broke in Jim, standing by one of the comfortable looking seats in the cabin. "I thought of it at the same time—before he said anything, anyhow."

"A friend of yours?" asked the Skipper grimly. He looked very forbidding as he stood there, glowering down on the two stowaways, and there was no sign of the smile at his lips now.

Jim shook his head.

"No—that is, not an old friend, but——"

"Just a companion in this pretty game, eh?" asked the Skipper, turning suddenly towards the other members of the official party. "Does anyone know this other youngster?"

The Professor and the Doctor shook their heads, and the others, excepting George Ayling, said nothing. George was at the controls, but they were locked, and he turned round slowly. Then he almost jumped from his seat, his eyes gleaming.

"Great Scott, yes! That's the lad Crasher or Bouncer or ——"

"Buster, Mr. Ayling," said Buster Howell with a little smile. He was certainly recovered from his shock now, and Jim was feeling a great deal better. "It's nearly two years since you left me at Bombay, isn't it?"

The Skipper drew a deep breath.

"Do you seriously mean to say you've done this *before?*" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," admitted Buster quietly. "I—oh, well, it seems silly, I know. But I've always loved travelling, and I could never afford it, and—I'll do anything, sir, work my passage anyway you please!"

"Know how to pilot an aeroplane?" barked the Skipper.

Buster swallowed uncomfortably.

"No, sir, but—but——"

"Then how can you work your passage?" demanded the Skipper. "No, don't trouble to answer. How old are you, my lad?" Buster drew a deep breath.

"Nearly eighteen, sir."

"Eighteen! Then you were only sixteen when you stowed away before.

"That's right, sir. I'd—I'd never stowed away on an aeroplane before, that was. I'd been on board ship, sir."

"Not by any chance the man who was covered with fish?" demanded the Skipper sarcastically.

Buster looked as though he didn't understand. The Professor said that the man he had thought about was much older, and then he pulled at his thick beard.

"But bless my soul, what are we going to do with them, Captain Crane? This is preposterous—preposterous!"

The Skipper grunted, although, like the others, he smiled inwardly at the fact that the Professor kept insisting that the situation was preposterous. Before anyone else spoke, however, Jim burst in:

"Captain Crane, I know I shouldn't have done this, but I was so disappointed last night at not being able to see you off, and I'd met Buster and—well, hang it, I wanted to come! I can tackle anything useful, and so can Buster, apart from piloting the *King!* Let us come with you! There's plenty of room, and we can get extra provisions at St. John's——"

"Got it all worked out, I see," grunted the Skipper, and then he added grimly: "But don't run away with the idea that you're coming further than St. John's. I —— *What's* that?"

He broke off in real surprise, for the radio—which had been working on and off during the flight—suddenly blared into the cabin, as clearly as if the speaker was standing with them.

But the words made everyone swing round, and stare towards the receiver. For the words seemed impossible.

"Calling Flying Boat *White King*—calling the *White King*——"

CHAPTER VIII

HOT NEWS

Every man in the cabin of the *King* heard the words clearly, and every mind was like a big question mark. This was the last thing that any of them had dreamed would happen, and the Skipper's face was very grim as he stepped nearer the radio.

The Professor and the Doctor, with the other members of the crew, crowded round him. Jim Penfold and Buster Howell were left standing by themselves. They were both smiling a little, although the Skipper's words had filled them both with a keen disappointment. He was not the type of man likely to change his mind, and he had been quite definite about leaving them at St. John's, Newfoundland, when the flying boat reached that point.

All things considered, however, they were relieved by the interruption, unexpected though it was. It took away the interest that had been centred on them, and they had a few minutes' respite. Moreover, both of them were shrewd enough to realise that the tension would not be quite so acute again, so far as their presence on board was concerned.

"That couldn't have happened better," whispered Buster. "But let's listen."

Jim was nothing loth, and the words of the announcer over the wireless came clearly. He repeated the name of the flying boat three times, and then he went on:

"Daventry Aviation Station calling. Police report attempt to destroy *White King* last night and advise commander to thoroughly examine luggage compartments and lockers. Police report——"

That was all, but it was more than enough. The expressions on the faces of the passengers were mixed, although there was grimness on everyone. The Professor looked startled, Dr. Humbolt was muttering to himself, George Ayling and Ken Wright were glaring out of the cabin windows, while the Skipper and Bert Chase seemed to regard each other helplessly.

It was the Skipper who spoke, as he twisted the terminal knobs of the transmitter on board, and proceeded to give an acknowledgment of the message. He said slowly:

"This looks queer, my friends, but it's probably a false alarm. Who *could* want to destroy the *King?*"

"Madness!" agreed the Doctor.

"Preposterous!" exclaimed the Professor, and although he did not realise it, that word eased the tension that had sprung up in the cabin. The lanky Ken Wright smiled a little, and even the Skipper's lips were curved as he transmitted the reassuring message, and then closed the transmitter down.

Jim Penfold was, strangely enough, so fascinated by the radio that he had almost forgotten that he had no business on board the flying boat. That anyone could speak as the Skipper had done, and yet know that his words were being received in London, a thousand miles away, seemed impossible. Yet it was a fact—one of the mysteries of science which almost flabbergasted Jim.

But they were brought back to their own position quickly.

"That's queer all right," said the Skipper. "Bert, you and Ken had better open all possible packages in the luggage room, and make sure there's nothing hidden there that might cause damage."

The Professor's face paled.

"You think there might be—be some explosive?"

"I don't think so," said the Skipper confidently, "but as we've had a warning, we'd best make sure."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so." The Professor tugged again at his beard, and not unnaturally looked worried. Before anyone moved, however, Buster drew attention to the stowaways.

"I say, Captain Crane, it isn't likely there's anything aboard, or the fellows would not have tried to set fire to the bus last night."

The Skipper eyed the speaker grimly.

"That's sound enough, but it reminds me I've got to talk to you. Bert—Ken—get busy in there. Professor, you might give the Doctor a hand to look in all the lockers and make sure there's nothing to worry about them. Keep at the controls, George. Now"—he looked at Jim and Buster, his expression very hard—"I don't want to be too unpleasant, but you two youngsters must realise you've done a most serious thing. Apart from the fact that it's a crime to stow away on board any kind of vehicle you might have seriously disturbed the laden weight of the *King*, and caused a crash. Did you think of that?"

Jim looked uncomfortable, and shook his head. He had never felt worse in his life, for he realised that his thoughtlessness might well have done all that the Skipper suggested. But Buster Howell did not look unduly perturbed, although there was nothing at all cheeky or impertinent in his manner.

"Excuse me, Captain, but I had learned the laden weight from the newspaper reports, and I knew that you could carry another ton of luggage. You're keeping ample space for any specimens you might wish to bring back. So —so I didn't think there was the slightest danger."

Even the Skipper was taken aback by that statement.

"Great Scott! You've a head on your shoulders, young 'un, although I'm probably a fool to say so!"

Buster's expression did not change, but he went on quickly, knowing that he had caught the Skipper out unexpectedly, and that this was the moment for taking advantage of one momentous fact—one that might even persuade the Skipper to let them stay aboard after St. John.

"And there's another thing, Captain. But for us—the *White King* would never have started the journey!"

The words were so unexpected that the Skipper's lips opened, and the Professor looked round with a start.

"What's that, eh, what's that?"

"Don't start romancing," said the Skipper quietly.

"It's not a fib, sir," protested Buster. "Jim—Jim made up his mind last night to come on board, and he slept for an hour or two in an old barn near the *King*. It was Jim who heard the talk about destroying the boat, sir, and we who stopped it!"

The Skipper didn't answer for a moment. He sat down heavily, and by this time the others had returned to the cabin, all of them startled at Buster's statement.

"Let's hear your story," the Skipper said.

Buster spoke quickly but quietly, telling the whole story without adding a single item. It was obvious that the others believed him, and when he related how they had tied the three crooks up and sent a message to the police, there was a smile on more faces than one.

There was silence for a few seconds after they had finished. Then the Skipper pushed his hand through his hair.

"An astonishing story," he admitted, "but I believe it, Howell. The warning over the radio confirms it, too. So that's how the police learned of the attempt!"

"I don't think it could have been any other way," Buster said eagerly. "And it was quite true when we said that the *King* would not have taken off if we hadn't decided to come."

The Skipper gave an amused smile.

"Quite true. And I suppose you think you've earned your passage?"

"I hope you'll think so, sir," said Buster quietly.

The Skipper shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll suspend judgment," he said, looking at Jim. "As a matter of fact, Jim, I would probably say 'yes' to Howell by himself. But you're a problem. Your father would certainly not approve."

Jim's face paled.

"I know, sir."

"And I can't very well do anything I know he won't approve of, while I can't let one stay without the other."

Jim spoke quickly.

"I hope you won't turn Buster back at St. John's because of that, sir. He planned the whole affair, and he deserves it. I—I'll have had some fun, anyhow."

The Skipper nodded, an appreciative smile in his eyes. It was obvious that since he had heard the story of the affair in the barn his attitude was altogether different, and while they were all together in the cabin Jim and Buster would be treated as if they were official members of the crew.

"I'll see, Jim. Now—I wonder if you're right, Howell—or I suppose, to be friendly, we'd better say Buster—whether you were right about there being nothing that shouldn't be in the 'plane?"

"If there had been, I think one of the fellows would have mentioned it last night," said Buster eagerly. "And it isn't as though they wanted to leave some explosives behind, they were just planning to set fire to the petrol."

"Ye-es. Anyhow, we'll have a look round to make sure."

By the time they had finished it was midday, Greenwich time, and every passenger there was much happier. For no trace of anything had been discovered, and it seemed reasonable to believe that there had been no attempt to put explosives in the *White King*. Naturally there was a great deal of discussion as to the likely reason for the attempt.

"Someone is working against Sir Arthur Penfold, that's certain enough," said the Skipper. "Well, I suppose we'll know all about it in good time. I—what's that, Bert?"

"Beg parding, sir," said Bert Chase gloomily, "but I made the tea a 'nour ago, sir, it—it's stooed."

"Stewed! I should say it has, you idiot! All right, we'll make the best of it."

Actually the man-of-all-work had made a fresh brew of tea, and every member of the crew was ready for it. They had a light meal, and at one o'clock the Skipper took over the controls again from Ken Wright.

The flight so far had been perfect. They had been in the air for eight hours, and their average speed had been over two hundred miles an hour. Allowing for the slight deviations from the direct route that they had been forced to take, they had covered half their journey.

"Looks like being a record run," smiled the Professor. "Well, I'm going to have a nap. Fancy those youngsters must be feeling tired, too. They——"

"Shhhh!" exclaimed the Doctor, holding up a warning finger.

Looking behind him, the Professor saw that the lads were fast asleep. Tired out after a practically sleepless night and the excitement of the battle with the crooks and the stowing away, they had dropped off as soon as they had finished eating.

And they were still sleeping four hours later, while the *King* hurtled across the skies, covering over three miles every minute. Still the weather was kind to them, but the sky was getting darker ahead of them, and the Skipper was no longer smiling. Twice he turned on the radio for the weather reports, and after the second time he grunted.

"Heavy winds ahead," he said. "We'll lose a bit of time I'm afraid."

"Can't be helped," said the Professor cheerfully. "Any need to tie ourselves to our seats?"

The Skipper chuckled at that.

"No, no need at all, it's likely to ride any kind of weather fairly well. All right, George, I'll take over."

George Ayling had been at the controls, but he relinquished them quietly, and the *King* roared directly into the teeth of the storm. In fact, without turning back, it would have been impossible to avoid doing so, for the sky was a leaden grey all about them now, and in the distance they could see the flashes of lightning, casting a weird yellow glow about the clouds and the sea.

They were flying at a height of three thousand feet, and beneath them they could see the mountainous waves as the ocean was gripped in the fury of the wind. There was no doubt about the turn in the weather, and the Skipper hoped hard that the storm would be a brief one.

It seemed to descend on them without warning.

Certainly there had been no warning for the two sleeping youngsters, who awakened at the same instant, as the wind seemed to take the gigantic flying boat and shake her like a dog! The *King* quivered from nose to tail, and then dipped startlingly, throwing the youngsters forward. They saved themselves with a sudden movement of their arms, and looked about them, appalled at the change in the conditions.

Blue skies had changed for black, threatening clouds, lightning was splitting the heavens in angry forks, and the thunder was rolling and booming about them. The *King* was pitched this way and that, for the wind was blowing like a squall, from all directions, and no ship or 'plane built could have ridden it steadily.

No one seemed particularly perturbed, but Buster and Jim felt an odd, sinking sensation. Somehow they both realised what a mess they would have been in had this come when they had been in hiding.

Well, there was no need to fear that. But now, looking at the Skipper's grimly set face, listening to the howling wind and seeing the vivid fireworks of nature about them, they felt nervous and uncertain. For they knew that if they were forced down, there would be no mercy from the angry, ravenous seas beneath.

No mercy——

CHAPTER IX

AGAINST THE STORM

THE Skipper's reassuring words some minutes before had not given any of the less experienced fliers the slightest idea that the storm would have the fury that it possessed. And in truth Captain Crane himself was surprised and worried.

There had not been the slightest suggestion from the weather reports that there were any disturbances ahead, and he had naturally assumed that the storm into which they had run was a purely local one.

Now he doubted it.

The elements seemed savage in their ferocity, thunder roared and rumbled like the firing of great guns, and the lightning played a constant fire, flashing into the cabin of the machine, showing the wings, glittering red and fiery on the sides and the under-carriage. Occasionally, when there was the slightest break between flashes of lightning, the darkness was such that it might have been the middle of the night.

Now and again great scudding clouds seemed to drop down and envelop the *King* in a dark grey mist that was illuminated in eerie fashion by the massed lightning. The effect was wonderful and awe-inspiring—and frightening.

Yes, frightening!

There was hardly a member of the crew of the *King* who did not feel that. Even the Skipper, although he did not reveal it for a moment, was inwardly worried and apprehensive. For the force of the wind was so great that he knew he could not guarantee to keep the *King* under control.

Even now she was losing height, being pushed down towards the sea as she battled on. The Skipper was pulling back on the joystick when he dared, taking advantage of the slightest alteration in the course of the wind, but there was little he could do.

Near him, Buster Howell and Jim Penfold sat absolutely still.

Both of them knew the theory of flying, and Jim knew the practical side of it as well. He had been taught all the emergency measures, and he knew that the Skipper, calmly though he acted, was fighting a desperate battle.

Jim hardly knew what thoughts were in his mind.

He did know that they were losing height, and the altimeter showed that they were flying at less than two thousand feet. The torrential rain hid the sea from their sight, to make the situation even worse. If the altimeter stopped working accurately, they might crash into the sea at any moment, without the slightest warning.

Each man was gripping the back of the seat in front of him. The Professor and the Doctor were sitting together, without speaking. Only

Bert Chase was keeping up a running commentary on the weather, obviously to keep his spirits up.

The *King* was like a shuttlecock in the grip of that mighty wind. Now the left wing would dip over perilously, now the right, with the Skipper working desperately at joystick and rudder-bar to keep her on an even keel.

Once the wind seemed to stop, and for a second there was an absolute calm. The *King* dropped down for a moment, then the Skipper pulled steadily back on the joystick. But as he did so a great gust of wind seemed to crash downwards from the skies!

The *King's* nose dipped forward and for a moment it seemed impossible that anything could save them from crashing into the sea. The tail was spinning round, no one kept their balance, the Professor and three others were in a huddled heap on the floor.

Jim Penfold felt a dreadful fear in his heart, and yet outwardly he kept cool. No matter what happened he must not show his fear, he *must* not!

And then suddenly he caught a glimpse of the ravenous sea beneath!

It could not be more than five hundred feet away, and it seemed to be leaping up at them, anxious to catch the flying boat before it could escape its grasp. Jim held his breath and waited for the crash.

He would never know how the Skipper managed to avoid it.

But somehow the pilot managed to regain control, and the *King* straightened out, her floats—she was fitted with floats as well as wheels—seemed to skim the seething surface of the waves. Then, his teeth clenched, the Skip forced himself to try and climb.

To be safe they must get upwards.

But the storm seemed to be raging above and about them with an even greater fury, the lightning and the thunder played in an ever-increasing majesty, the *King* swayed from side to side as her nose pushed bravely upwards towards the mists of clouds above.

And then, very suddenly, there was a lessening in the bucketing, and for perhaps a minute the *King* flew steadily, climbing fast all the time. When the wind descended on them again it was nothing like so fierce, and a few minutes afterwards the darkness broke ahead of them, and they saw the first streaks of the evening sun in the clear skies ahead.

They were through!

. . . . .

No one needed telling that the ordeal of that fight with the elements was over, and for some minutes no one spoke. Then the Professor said slowly:

"Thank God for that—and for your strength, Crane."

There was a peculiar little smile on the Skipper's lips.

"I assure you that I thought we were finished," he said. "I'd no idea it would be anything like as bad as that. Well, it's all's well that ends well. Glad you weren't in the luggage-room, young fellows?"

"I've been thanking you for that since it started," admitted Buster devoutly. "We'd have been in a dreadful mess."

"It's the kind of thing that might happen to stowaways any time," said George Ayling with a smile. "Anyhow, we're through. Far off our course, Skip?"

Skipper John Crane had been studying his instruments, and he did not answer for a few seconds. Then he smiled.

"Strangely enough, no. We lost time, of course, but we kept forging ahead in the right direction."

"How much further to St. John's?" asked Buster.

"Anxious to leave us?" smiled the Skipper.

"You bet I'm not!" exclaimed Buster; "it was just curiosity. How much further is there, Skip?"

"Something under a thousand miles," answered the Skipper quietly. "Or let's say six hours, if the weather keeps good. We've been flying for ten, now, so even the storm won't prevent a record crossing. George, will you radio news of that storm, just in case anyone else is likely to strike it?"

Once again Jim Penfold was made to realise the tremendous usefulness of radio to airmen. George Ayling, his face as cheerful as ever and his blue eyes twinkling, sent out the message across the ether, warning ships and aeroplanes of the cyclone that had smashed down on them, and giving the exact position of it, and the direction in which it had been going.

That finished, Bert Chase provided a rush meal—he had been unable to cook anything during the storm—and the *King* kept going steadily now towards the coast of Newfoundland, without showing the slightest effect of the ordeal through which she had passed. Every engine was ticking over perfectly.

Jim and Buster had time to sit back and think things out.

They had both been worried by the storm, although neither of them had shown the slightest fear—a fact that the Skipper and the other pilots had duly noticed, and admired. Nor did the experience make them wish that they had not started the flight. They were as anxious as ever to get onwards, and they were hoping desperately that the Skipper would let them continue after the first stop.

As the miles sped beneath their wings and they saw the darkening skies of night, speckled with stars, they realised for the first time that flying could be monotonous. There was no thrill in actually sitting there, without moving. The thrill came in the knowledge that they could get from place to place so swiftly, that distance was being conquered, defeated by man.

It was strange how soothing it was to be flying through the air at over two hundred miles an hour through the darkness. Now and again, moreover, the Skipper—or one of the relief pilots—switched on the great searchlight, to carve a tremendous white beam through the blackness that seemed to stretch for miles. But for the most part the *King* travelled only with her navigation lights, her nose pointed straight towards St. John's.

Jim's mind was filled with many strange thoughts.

Vividly he recalled the affair in the barn, and more than ever he wondered why his father had been chosen by the Boss for his enmity. Who was the Boss? Did the police know anything more about him? And who was Peter Morgan, and what gang did he run?

It had seemed like a slice from a different life, a life of crookdom and evil. It was odd to think that because he had been disappointed by his father, and challenged by Buster Howell, the thing had happened.

He almost wished he was in England, able to follow the affair up! But that was only a fleeting thought, and he was still wondering whether or no there would be the slightest chance of him accompanying the expedition.

The more he thought of it the more he realised it was unlikely. When they had little more than two hours' flying to do, however, and the time for a decision grew nearer, he left his seat next to Buster—who was nodding off to sleep—and slipped into that next to the Skipper, at the controls.

Behind him, everyone but the lanky Ken Wright was asleep, and for some reason he was glad that no one overheard his conversation.

"How will you get in touch with Dad, Skipper?"

The Skipper, with the controls locked, for the 'plane was flying very smoothly and there was hardly a breath of wind, chuckled a little.

"I don't doubt I'll find him in New York, Jim."

"But he didn't leave his address, did he?"

"No, he said that he would be at one of three hotels. Still that really doesn't matter—I was forgetting that the liner will take three times as long getting across the Atlantic—or five times, for that matter—as we will. Your father will still be on board the liner he left Southampton in."

"Do you know which one it was?"

"Yes, the *Blaric*. And I'll send a cable to it, from St. John's, asking for a decision." The Skipper rested his hand for a moment on Jim's arm. "Want to come with us pretty badly, don't you?"

Jim nodded quietly.

"I'd give almost anything in the world to come!" he assured the Skipper. "And—I didn't intend to eavesdrop, Skip, but I heard you talking to Mr. Miller yesterday. I know you've no objection yourself to my coming."

The Skipper's eyes widened.

"Ho-ho! You heard that, did you. Well, it makes no odds, Jim. I can't take you without letting your father know, but as you're this far with us, he may decide that it will be riskier to let you travel back to England alone than come along with us. Any idea why he was so anxious you shouldn't come?"

Jim shook his head. He was sorely tempted to tell the Skipper that his father had pretended it was because of Skip's objections that he was adamant, but the youngster was loyal to the older man.

"None at all," he admitted. "And as for sending me to Doncaster last night, it seemed silly. I——"

He stopped suddenly, and the Skipper wondered what idea had flashed through the youngster's mind. For Jim's eyes had widened, and his lips opened as though he had received a sudden and completely unexpected shock.

"Well, young 'un. What's biting?"

Jim drew a deep breath.

"It sounds silly, perhaps," he said slowly, "but I've just had an idea, Skip. Supposing Dad knew that there was danger of some kind? Remember I told you how the Boss said that he would kidnap me and hold me to ransom? Supposing Dad realised there was a chance of that, and therefore sent me up to Doncaster, to my uncle? That would explain it, wouldn't it?"

The Skipper slapped his knee resoundingly.

"By Jove it would! And it would also explain why Sir Arthur suddenly decided to dash to America, without telling anyone definitely where he was going! I believe you've hit it, young 'un!"

Jim nodded. He was almost too excited and, in some ways, too worried, to think clearly. For he knew that there was some deep mystery surrounding this affair, and for the life of him he could not imagine what it was, only that his father was almost certainly *afraid* of something.

Not for a moment did he dream that the "something" would soon loom very close to them, that the flight of the *White King* would be affected by the evil activities directed against Sir Arthur—and that the danger of the elements and the North Pole was not the only one they faced.

They were at the beginning of a strange adventure, different from anything they had dreamed or planned, and no one suspected it for a moment!

CHAPTER X

NEWFOUNDLAND!

NEITHER the Skipper nor Jim Penfold spoke for several minutes, and when at last Jim broke the silence his voice was very strained.

"Well—if that's the case, Skip, I'd better go back to England without—without arguing. If Dad's worried, it won't be fair to add more worries, will it?"

The Skipper did not say so, but he appreciated the thoughtfulness of the youngster, and he told himself yet again that Jim Penfold was made of the right stuff.

"We'll get in touch with the *Blaric*, and we can worry about that then," he said. "Now try to stop worrying about it. By the way——" The Skipper's eyes twinkled as he looked at Jim, and the latter found it impossible not to wonder what was coming, despite his anxious thoughts.

"Yes, Skip?"

"Tell young Buster that he doesn't know everything, even if he did think about our laden weight. Within half an hour of taking off I guessed we had stowaways."

"You—guessed?" Jim stared at the other, hardly able to believe his own ears. "But how——"

"There's an instrument showing the weight of the 'plane in the air," smiled the Skipper. "I knew that we were about twenty stones heavier than we should have been, and I fancied it was—well, a stowaway. I won't say that I guessed who it was, but I thought the young scamp deserved a part of the flight, anyhow!"

Jim just sat back, staring at the older man. He had not dreamed of that for a moment. So the discovery had not been accidental!

"Then—then you could have turned back and landed us in England!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, but as I say, I thought whoever it was deserved it." The Skipper chuckled. "That's all for now, Jim. We're getting close to our landing-stage, and I want to concentrate."

With a smile, the Skipper dismissed the youngster, who stepped across to his own seat in a daze. Then suddenly he smiled, for he realised that the Skipper had also guessed who had stowed away, and that he had deliberately started the flight without saying a word.

A good sort, Skipper John Crane!

Jim told Buster soon afterwards, and the youthful wanderer agreed with his opinion of the Skipper. Buster had slept for several hours on and off, and he was very talkative now. For the first time Jim realised that he knew very little about his fellow-stowaway, and although he was eager to learn all he could, he did not want to ask questions.

Buster seemed to guess what was in his mind, however.

"Yes, I've had some fun," he admitted. "As a matter of fact, Jim, when I was fifteen my—my mother and father were killed in a motor accident. There wasn't a great deal of money, and a defrauding solicitor pinched what there was. So at fifteen I was absolutely on my uppers."

Jim was genuinely moved.

"Rotten bad luck!" he exclaimed.

Buster smiled wryly.

"Well, it couldn't be helped, Jim. I'd been to St. Alwen's, but I had to leave quickly. You see, as far as I know I've no relatives in the world. My headmaster got me a job in an office, but I just couldn't stand it. I managed to get work on an ocean-going tramp, but the skipper turned out to be a rotter, and I left the boat at Marseilles. I'd no money, so I had to stow away. The boat I chose was going to Australia, not to England as I thought, and so I started wandering."

Jim was listening spell-bound. It hardly seemed possible that these things could have happened to a youngster only a year older than he was, but there was not the slightest doubt of their truth.

"And the skipper of the Australian boat was so decent that I decided I'd try and see the world by stowing away," went on Buster. "I've been to India, America, Australia and South Africa, in fact nearly every country where people speak English. And of all the ships, flying boats are the most exciting!"

"I'll bet they are," chuckled Jim. "What made you come on the *King*, though?"

"Well, I liked the idea, and then I learned that George Ayling was aboard," returned Buster. "He'd been very decent to me before, and I knew I'd have one friend here, anyhow. As it happens they've turned out a jolly decent lot. It's a pity we can't go on, isn't it?"

"But you'll go ahead," said Jim quickly. "The Skipper need not get permission for that. He'll just take you as an extra member of the crew."

Buster chuckled.

"Fine! And you'll be stranded at Newfoundland until some ship will take you to America, and you'll stand the racket with your father yourself. Oh, no, my son! We'll stick together!"

Jim did his best to change the other's mind, but Buster was adamant. Jim felt a warm glow of appreciation for the other's sportsmanship, and he admired Buster even more for the way he had roughed it, and managed to see the world with practically no money.

They stopped talking after a while, however, and the *King* went onwards through the star-decked heavens. By now the other members of the crew were awake and alert. Jim looked at his watch.

"Twelve o'clock, Greenwich time," he said. "We've been up eighteen hours. How much longer, Skip?" he added aloud.

"Look below and ahead of you," said the Skipper.

Both lads did as he suggested, and at the same time they saw the great searchlights that were shining through the darkness below. By now, too, the darkness of the night was being replaced by a misty greyness, and they could just make out the rocky coastline of the great island.

The searchlights below marked their landing field, they knew, and they were filled with a tense excitement. The Skipper—who always took off and landed—was pushing the stick forward, and the *King* was losing height rapidly. The searchlights seemed to grow nearer, and now it was possible to see little dots—representing men on the airfield—everywhere.

Slowly the *King* circled as she prepared to land. Jim held his breath in excitement as the earth loomed towards them. Then suddenly, before he had expected it, the wheels—which were prepared now for a ground landing, although during the flight across the Atlantic the floats had been in position—touched the ground. The great flying boat bounced a little, ran bumpily at a fast-decreasing speed and then, as the Skipper applied the brakes, came to a standstill.

The first stage in that great flight was over, and they had crossed the Atlantic in record time!

. . . . .

There was a warm welcome awaiting at the airfield of St. John's, a big town that surprised Jim Penfold. For some reason he had expected to find little more than a trading post, but he quickly realised that so far as that was concerned he had been living in the past.

The place was a thriving township of over forty thousand people, and several thousand of the inhabitants had crowded into the airfield. There was a surging mass, kept back with an effort by the police and authorities, as the *White King* landed and the cabin doors opened. As they opened, the deep-throated cheers of the populace welcoming the fliers entered the cabin, and Jim and Buster were aghast.

So was the Professor and Doctor Humbolt, although the others seemed to have expected something of the sort.

"A record Atlantic flight, and they're going to show us that they know it!" chuckled the Skipper. "We'll be cheered to the echo and fêted for as long as we like. And by Jove, won't there be a sensation when they see our stowaways!"

Jim looked more than a little alarmed.

"I say! Need they know we're here?"

"You'll have a job to stop 'em," smiled the Skipper. "One of the rewards of stowing away, young fellow! Well, let's face it! This looks like the official reception party!"

The Skipper stepped from the cabin as five men, two of them with chains of office round their necks, stepped towards the *King*. The Professor muttered something under his breath about a lot of nonsense, but he jumped down quickly enough. The others followed, while

Jim and Buster, far more nervous of this than they had been of the storm, brought up the rear.

A tall, fat man with a cheerful expression shook hands with the official six members of the party. Then he saw Jim and Buster for the first time, and started.

"Who—who are these?" he demanded.

"Stowaways," chuckled the Skipper. "But they're all right, Sir Martin—this is young Penfold and a friend of his!"

"Penfold's son!" exclaimed Sir Martin Yeoll, Mayor of St. John's. "Good heavens, this doesn't seem possible! Deuced plucky of you, young fellow! And you——" He shook hands with both Jim and Buster, and seemed still to be a little bemused at the fact that they were aboard.

Others were startled, too, and the rumour soon went round that there were two young stowaways on board the flying boat. It was a thing that captured the imagination of the kindly folk, English, Canadian, French and native alike, and the youngsters found themselves in danger of being mobbed. In fact one excited section of the crowd did grab Buster and begin to hoist him shoulder high, but a squad of police came to his rescue, and he was rushed with Jim in the wake of the official expedition party.

By then, dawn had broken fully, and they were able to see the teeming crowd about them, still excited and cheering.

The airfield was a big place, and the offices and hangars reminded Jim of Heston, near London. He had little time for thinking, however, for the party was soon crowded into cars that were waiting nearby, and rushed off to a hotel where they were to spend the next few days.

The Skipper had arranged for mechanics to look over the engines, although he himself would look at them, with George, Ken and Bert, before the day was out. For the moment, they were glad of the opportunity of a bath and a change of clothes, and the splendid meal that was waiting for them.

The hotel was an excellent one, and Jim and Buster chuckled to themselves when they realised how well they were being treated. The only clouds over them were the fact that they would probably be allowed to go no further, and the strange mystery that concerned Jim's father.

"Well, that can't be helped just now," said Jim wearily. "Let's see what we can of St. John's!"

But they were doomed to disappointment in that direction. They had been given a room to share for the stay in St. John's, which would last for three or four days in any case, for there were many preparations to be made before the next stage in their flight was started—a fact which the stowaways had not realised.

As they turned towards the door, it opened and the Skipper appeared, smiling soberly.

"Well, Jim, I've put a radio-telephone call through to the *Blaric*. We should get it any minute, and then we'll know your fate. Coming downstairs?"

"Yes, of course!" exclaimed Jim, and Buster echoed the words. They followed the Skipper to his room—which had a telephone—both of them a little startled at the fact that it would be possible to talk with the people on the liner as it ploughed its way across the ocean.

But the wonders of radio-telephony were half-forgotten in the perturbation that filled Jim's mind.

"What would his father's reaction be? What decision would be made?

He told himself that he wanted nothing more in the world than to continue the flight with the expedition party, but in his heart of hearts he doubted whether his father would give him permission. He waited, hands in pockets, face set, and Buster did the same.

They jumped when the telephone bell burred out. The Skipper took the receiver off quickly, and they knew a moment later that he was actually talking to someone aboard the *Blaric*, in mid-Atlantic. Someone—in all likelihood Sir Arthur Penfold.

Jim could not prevent his body from trembling a little, and he waited on tenterhooks, watching the Skipper all the time. He saw Skipper Crane's face alter, saw his smile disappear, and then he heard the words that were literally barked out.

"*What's* that? Not on board? But it's impossible! I know he embarked!"

Thousands of miles away the Captain of the *Blaric* spoke easily and confidently.

"I am afraid you're mistaken, Captain Crane. We have no one on board named Penfold—Sir Arthur or anyone else!"

CHAPTER XI

THE STRANGER 'PLANE

JIM PENFOLD hardly heard the rest of that dramatic conversation, for he was too dazed by the inference in the Captain's words. According to John Crane's barked utterance, his father had not gone on board the *Blaric*. Yet he had bought tickets, had flown to Southampton at short notice, and he had had his cabin trunk packed with all the necessary clothes for the long voyage.

Yet he wasn't on board!

Jim's lips were parted, and his hands clenched at his sides, when the Skipper replaced the receiver and turned round. There was a greater grimness than ever about the rugged airman.

He saw the effect of the words on Jim, and understood why. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and sympathetic.

"A nasty piece of news, Jim. It makes the mystery even deeper."

"But hang it!" cried Jim, suddenly finding himself able to speak. "We know that he went on board!"

The Skipper shrugged his shoulders.

"We don't, Jim. All we know is that he intended to go on board. It looks as though he changed his mind at the last moment. The

Captain of the *Blaric* assures me that he knows Sir Arthur well by sight, and that he's not aship. We can't get away from that fact, young 'un."

Jim's eyes were blazing.

"Then it means he's in trouble! Skip, I've got to get back to England, to try and find the reason——"

"Sorry," said the Skipper briefly. "I can't let you out of my sight until I've heard from your father, Jim. You're my responsibility, and you'll be a lot safer with us than you would in England, trying some mad-brained idea to find this fellow the Boss, and to locate your father. I——"

"I must go!" repeated Jim doggedly.

The Skipper appreciated the spirit of the youngster's words, but he knew it was impossible to agree to the other's request. As Crane said, Jim was now his responsibility. There was bitter irony in the fact that Jim had stowed himself away, only to find now that he wanted to be in England, but that could not be helped.

Strangely enough, it was Buster who offered some kind of consolation, and presented two ideas that had occurred neither to Jim nor the Skipper.

"Do you know what I'd do if I thought someone was after my blood?" he asked quietly.

"No, what?" It was the Skipper who answered.

"I'd just disappear," said Buster slowly. "I'd let it be known I was going to a certain place, and then I wouldn't turn up. Don't you think that's what happened with Jim's father? He was aware that there was danger, and he wanted to make sure that he was out of it. So he sent Jim up to Doncaster—where Jim would have no idea of the trouble—and pretended to start for America himself."

There was a moment's silence. In it Jim's eyes gleamed.

"Skip, do you think that's likely?"

Skipper John Crane drew a deep breath.

"I do," he admitted. "I think you've worked it out, Buster. And listen, Jim. If you were with your uncle in Doncaster you'd know nothing of this affair, you would not even know the Boss existed, or that there was any danger. You could do nothing at all, then. No more than you can with us, thousands of miles away. Isn't that true?"

For the first time the tension of anxiety dropped away from Jim Penfold. He was more worried than he liked to say, but Buster's suggestion and the Skipper's words were unanswerable.

"Yes, of course," he said.

"And being with us will give you plenty to think about," added the Skipper, resting his hand on the lad's shoulder. "Try and forget your worries. Your father knows how to look after himself all right, and we've plenty for you to do here. Besides," he added with a chuckle, "Buster might have some more ideas to keep you going."

He glanced at the other youngster, and was surprised to see the serious expression in his eyes.

"I've one other idea," Buster said quietly.

"Let it rip," said the Skipper.

"We ought to send a message to the police in London, telling them what we've learned. Then they'll be able to follow up the affair, and perhaps have more luck in locating Sir Arthur, if anything has gone wrong. Remember," he added, turning to Jim, "the man who called himself the Boss was taken prisoner. *He* can't be doing any damage."

"That's true enough," admitted the Skipper. "Good idea, too. I'll send a long cable right away."

"Could you find out if the three men were caught all right, or whether any of them escaped?" asked Jim.

"Yes, I'll ask 'em to tell me," promised the Skipper. "Now hop off, young fellows, and have a look at St. John's. We've plenty to do here, you know. Among other things, we're taking off the floats, and replacing them with ice-skids for landing on ice, and that ought to be something to interest you."

Jim Penfold told himself that it would take a great deal to interest him in anything but the mystery of his father's disappearance, but he was surprised how quickly that was forgotten—temporarily at least—in the excitement at looking about the Newfoundland town. Moreover, the fitting of the *White King* with its ice-skids, which took most of the following day, fascinated him. He knew that by simply pressing a switch it was possible to turn the wheels round so that the skids were uppermost, and vice versa. The flying boat had previously been an amphibian, able to land on sea and water: he wondered what it would be called now.

"I'll give it up," smiled the Skipper when the question was put. This was on the evening of their second day at St. John's. "Now I've some news for you. I've had a cable from Scotland Yard, and they tell me that all three men were taken fron the barn, and they also think that Sir Arthur is hiding himself, that he's in no danger. That's the official opinion, Jim!"

"Thank heaven for that!" exclaimed Jim Penfold. "I needn't worry too much now."

"You needn't worry at all," smiled the Skipper. "Well, we've made fine progress, and we're off at dawn. How's that?"

"To-morrow?" Buster and Jim gasped the word together.

"To-morrow as ever was," smiled the Skipper, glad to see the enthusiasm in the eyes of the lads, particularly in Jim's. "Get to bed early, and don't forget a good supper. And above all, my sons," he added sepulchrally, "don't go climbing into the luggage compartment instead of bed!"

. . . . .

There had been a lot of things about St. John's that had surprised Jim Penfold. For one thing, he had had a vague idea that the country was covered with snow and ice all the year round, but this was a long way from the truth. In fact there was vegetation in plenty, and glorious arrays of flowers in many of the gardens and public parks.

He learned that the winter was particularly severe, however, and lasted for about seven months. Most of the time there was snow on the ground and, of course, for several months the great harbour was absolutely icebound.

"How far do we go before we meet the ice?" he asked the Skipper next morning, as they drove towards the airfield.

"We'll find it in three or four hundred miles, up along the Labrador coast," said Skipper Crane. "Then we'll have it all the way, pretty well. You'll probably be tired of it within a few days!"

"There'll be plenty of fun," said Buster Howell, and the others laughed.

Actually, however, all of them were looking forward to the next stage in the flight, and even the Professor and Dr. Humbolt found it difficult to repress their excitement. Despite the early hour—about the same time, in fact, as they had arrived—there were large crowds to see them off on the next, and perhaps more difficult, part of their journey.

Things went smoothly, and as dawn was breaking the Skipper started the propellers, the three great engines roared, and the *King* began to move forward. The roars of their send-off rang warmly in their ears, and they waved until the crowd of people looked nothing but a mass of little white dots on the ground beneath—upturned faces, watching the disappearance of a flying boat that was to challenge the Arctic wastes, and whose crew would not be likely to be seen for months to come.

No one dreamed of the danger ahead of the *King*—danger worse than that of the ice and snow and storms, because of its very unexpectedness. No one had any inkling of the things that had been happening in England, of the disaster that had befallen Sir Arthur Penfold, and of the evil machinations of the man who called himself the Boss.

For on the previous day the Boss had been before the magistrates. *No proof, however, had been obtained of his intention to set fire to the King.* In an effort to save himself from the anger of the others, Grice had refused to tell the authorities what he had told the lads. Consequently, the Boss, Pete Morgan and Grice had been allowed to go free.

In the meantime other members of the gang had been busy.

The Boss took their reports, and then went to a little village near Southampton. In an outlying cottage, bound hand and foot, was Sir Arthur Penfold!

Jim would have been aghast had he been able to see his father lying there helpless and in the hands of these ruffians. But thousands of miles separated them, and Jim believed there was every reason to think his father had deliberately disappeared.

In some ways, Sir Arthur was a courageous man. But the swarthy-faced Boss wanted certain information, and he knew how he could get it. After an hour's questioning, Sir Arthur collapsed, telling the others what they wanted.

The Boss's little eyes glittered.

"Fine! It couldn't have been better, Sir Arthur. Now I'll leave you, and I'll see what I can find. If you've spoken the truth, you might escape alive!"

Without another word the crook had left the helpless baronet. Two people were at the cottage, looking after the prisoner, while the Boss, Pete Morgan and three other men started on their journey—a journey that was to put the crew of the *White King* to such terrible peril.

For the Boss cared for nothing provided he obtained what he was after—something that was worth hundreds of thousands of pounds!

. . . . .

For just over an hour the *White King* had been flying smoothly, and now it was crossing the channel that separated Newfoundland from the American Continent. Another hour's flying to Hamilton Inlet, on the Labrador coast, and it was shortly afterwards that Buster startled the others by a single cry.

"*Ice!*"

He had been peering through his glasses ahead of the *King* and he saw the great, grey-white expanse that stretched out there. They were within reach now of the first *tundra*—or ice desert—on their route, and as it grew nearer there was something fascinating about it, something that seemed hardly possible.

For tens—hundreds!—of miles the *tundra* stretched, and from the air it looked a great flat expanse, although here and there were hills that were topped with snow glittering white beneath the sun. There was nothing else to be seen, and soon the dazzling reflection of the whiteness caused Jim's eyes to ache.

He had been sitting looking ahead of him, half-dreaming. Consequently he had not heard the Skipper's order. Now, glancing round, he saw that the others were all wearing smoked glasses.

In a small pocket in the back of the seat in front of him he saw a pair of them. Putting them on, he found that they rested his eyes a great deal. He smiled at the fact that he had almost failed to follow the example of the others, and little realised that he had risked the worst of all things that befell explorers in those regions—snow-blindness.

The constant dazzle and the monotonous whiteness caused it, and it was one of the worst enemies to explorers. But they were well-prepared, Jim thought, and——

He stopped thinking suddenly, as he stared towards the right—towards the north-east. At first he told himself that he was dreaming, and that what he could see was a bird. But as it grew nearer, he knew that he had not been mistaken in the first thought that had flashed into his mind.

A small, dark object over there was another aeroplane! There was a second machine flying above those frozen wastes!

Even then, as he turned excitedly to Buster and the others, he did not dream of the truth—did not dream that two of the men in the other 'plane would prove familiar to him—the Boss and Pete Morgan, whom he had last seen in the barn near the Surrey aerodrome field!

CHAPTER XII

THE THREAT

JIM'S excited shout disturbed several of the others from a reverie, while even the Skipper, who had been wide awake, had not glimpsed the other 'plane. No one had dreamed for a moment that there was another aeroplane within hundreds—perhaps thousands—of miles, and the sight of the biplane honing towards them was much more surprising than the appearance of the stowaways a few days before.

"Great Scott—it *is* a 'plane!" gasped Ken Wright, his lanky figure jerking upwards. "Hefty-looking biplane too—I wonder who the blazes it can be?"

"I didn't know there was any other expedition out this way," said the Professor.

"Nor did I," admitted the Skipper, who had not the slightest inkling of the purpose behind the flight of the biplane. "And as far as I know, there were no long distance flights planned. It looks to me as if someone has decided on a surprise hop somewhere. Ken, get the radio ready for receiving short distance messages, will you?"

Ken Wright immediately stepped to the radio. Buster and Jim were studying the oncoming 'plane through their glasses, seething with excitement. The Professor muttered something beneath his breath, and then the others heard him say clearly:

"Preposterous! Incredible!"

Jim chuckled: the Professor certainly liked that word! But he took little notice of the Professor or the other members of the crew: he was too busy trying to make out the faces of the men in the approaching biplane.

It was strange and somehow thrilling to meet another 'plane out here, and he told himself that the other fellows probably felt the same. Little dreaming who were coming, he tried to guess what nationality they were, and the object of their flight.

Buster was still studying the biplane carefully.

It was little more than half a mile away, now, and was making straight for them. The *King* had changed its course a little, in order to intercept the biplane more quickly. The Skipper, always prepared for emergency, knew that the crew of the other aeroplane might be in some need of help, and he wanted to lose no time if that was the case.

Ken Wright was still fiddling with the radio terminals. But he had not succeeded in getting the correct range of the biplane before Jim exclaimed again.

This time there was a different expression in his voice, and the Skipper, looking round at him quickly, saw that his face was pale. For a moment Jim didn't speak. Then the words seemed to rush out like a torrent.

"Buster—recognise 'em? Pete—*and the Boss!*"

There was a moment of startled silence in the cabin of the *White King*. All the six original members of the expedition party knew the story of the Boss well enough to realize in a flash who and what Jim was talking about, and the Skipper's eyes suddenly narrowed. The Professor broke the silence.

"Nonsense, my boy, it can't be. It——"

"*It is!*" cried Buster Howell, jumping suddenly from his seat. "It's the couple of crooks we tied up in the barn, Skipper, I'll swear to it! And they must be after us!"

The words started yet another silence in the cabin, and this time it was more tense, for every member of the crew remembered the fact that these two men, flying towards them, had tried to destroy the *White King* before it had taken off at the start of the flight. The same thought sprang to all their minds now. They were trying to prevent the expedition from being completed—they were out for blood!

The Skipper didn't hesitate.

He had slowed down a little and the *King* had been travelling at about a hundred-and-fifty miles an hour. Now it seemed to lurch forward, and the air-speed indicator showed that they were touching nearly two-hundred-and-fifty. The distance between the two machines increased perceptibly, while at the same time the Skipper pulled back on the stick, taking an upward course. He was by no means sure what the other fellows intended, but he did not propose to be taken by surprise now that they had an idea who the men were.

The silence lingered in the cabin. Jim and Buster were too staggered by this development to say anything, and the others were worried. But Ken Wright, Bert Chase and George Ayling did not hesitate. They slipped to a cupboard built into the wall of the cabin, and Jim caught a glimpse of automatic pistols being pushed into their pockets.

Ken Wright went back immediately to the radio. As he did so, the silence in the cabin was broken—broken in a way that none of them had really expected. For the speaker was not inside—he was in the biplane, now nearly a mile away. And to Jim and Buster there was no mistaking that harsh voice. It was the Boss!

"Slow down, *White King*, if you know what's good for you!"

There was menace and provocativeness in the words, and it proved to the crew of the *King* that the others realised they had been recognised. In fact there could have been no other explanation of the way the monoplane had suddenly increased its speed.

The Skipper's voice was harsh.

"George—take over the controls. Keep climbing to fifteen thousand feet, and get all the speed you can. I'll talk to these gentry!"

They changed positions quickly, and the Skipper reached the radio set, speaking quickly into the transmitter. Even in those circumstances, Jim could not stop himself from marvelling at the fact that they could carry on a conversation with the crooks in the biplane, without wires, simply by turning a knob or two in the radio-transmitter.

Both he and Buster were on tenterhooks, Jim more so, perhaps, than the other, for he knew that he was personally concerned in this affair. He wondered how the Skipper would handle it.

Skipper John Crane proved then that he was never ruffled, that nothing disturbed his quiet calm. For his voice was even now, and there was no trace of harshness.

"That was a strange message. Radio name of machine and pilot, please."

Buster chuckled at the coolness of the request, but Jim kept his glasses trained on the biplane. He had been trying to read the name all along, but not until this moment did the machine turn broadside, so that he could just make out the lettering on the cabin sides. He had to spell it out aloud, to make sure he had it correctly.

"W—A—S—P," he muttered. "The *Wasp*, I——"

But he broke off quickly as the Boss's voice came clearly again, with the same note of menace.

"Never mind that! Be warned, Crane. We want you to land, and we're going to talk with you. If you don't get down at once we'll force you down!"

This was war talk: there was not the slightest question of that, and Bert Chase grunted something under his breath as he took out his automatic. The Skipper was watching the other machine carefully, and he saw what the others missed—that although when they had suddenly increased speed they had jumped away from the *Wasp*, the other 'plane was now keeping pace with them, and climbing at the same angle.

"Got all speed on, George?" he asked.

"Every ounce," nodded George Ayling.

"Hump. Keep going. We'll see what they're made of."

He made no effort to answer the demand of the *Wasp*, and Jim inwardly congratulated him. There was, in fact, no other way in which that warlike challenge could have been answered, excepting by immediate surrender. John Crane was not the man to give way without some kind of a fight, and with his heart thumping hard against his ribs, Jim wondered what kind of battle it would be.

He knew what the Skipper was hoping, but in his heart he doubted whether those hopes would be fulfilled.

John Crane was trying to find out whether they had the legs of the *Wasp*. But the biplane was a smaller machine than the *King*, while in all likelihood it was not so heavily loaded. Even with the naked eye Jim could see the two powerful engines, and although he was not sure he fancied that the biplane was built on the same lines as the Bristol Scout—one of the fastest cabin 'planes in the world.

Apparently the Boss—whatever his other name was—took the silence from the *King* as a challenge. He made no comment, and the radio was stilled. But the *Wasp* continued to keep pace with them, and if anything it was slightly gaining.

The Skipper's jaw jutted out.

He had switched off the transmitter, to make sure that his words were not overheard across the ether.

"Everything possible coming out of her, George? What's the speed?"

"Two-five-five," said George Ayling. "With this load she can't get another mile."

"No-o. She's going pretty well as it is. All right, just keep steady. Professor—you're officially in charge of this expedition. Supposing those fellows open fire? What do we do?"

Professor Ray looked troubled. He eyed the Skipper frankly, pulled nervously at his beard, and then grunted.

"I suppose we should do what they want," he said. "But—no, confound it, it's preposterous! Preposterous! Can we fight them back, Crane?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure what arms they've got. If they're fitted with machine-guns we wouldn't have a great deal of hope. They've a lighter machine, and can get round better. Biplanes are always easier to handle than monoplanes, anyhow, when it comes to scrapping."

No one spoke for a moment, and it was Jim who broke the tense silence. All the time the biplane was coming after them, and although there was not a great deal in it, it was obvious that the *Wasp* was gaining a trifle.

Jim had told himself that it was fantastic, that it could not be happening. Out here, over the frozen wastes of the Arctic Circle, it was incredible that two 'planes should be flying in opposition, that threats could possibly be handed one to the other.

But it was true! And in his heart he guessed that he was the reason for the arrival of the *Wasp*.

"It looks to me as though—as though they're after me," he said quietly. "Skip, it's not fair to risk smashing up the expedition and—and the rest of you. The Boss is poisonous—a killer, I wouldn't mind betting. I'll face it out, and——"

"'Nuff said," smiled the Skipper. "That's a darned fine offer, Jim, but we can't consider it. Anyhow, I'll see what I can find out. Those devils can't open fire on us, surely."

Despite his words the Skipper was by no means confident, and his voice was hard as he turned on the transmitting coil again, and spoke to the Boss.

"*Wasp*, we want an explanation of this nonsense. What are you after?"

There was a moment's pause, before the Boss spoke, in a sneering tone that made Jim Penfold shiver.

"You'll see what's nonsense, Crane! We've two Lewis-guns on board, and unless you make for land we'll use 'em! Never mind what we want! I see you've got young Penfold aboard. He'll do for a start, anyhow."

So they were after him, thought Jim desperately, but before he could speak Buster broke in coolly.

"They couldn't have known you were aboard, Jim, or he wouldn't have said, "I see." So they didn't start out after you."

That was reasonable, Jim thought, small consolation though it was. He waited on tenterhooks for the Skipper's next words. They came quickly enough.

"If you open fire, *Wasp*, it's an act of piracy. Do you know the penalty?"

The Boss's harsh laugh came clearly over the ether.

"Never mind about penalties, we're too far away from anywhere to let that worry us?"

"Ever heard of radio?" snapped the Skipper.

"Sure. But that's not going to worry us, because when we get what we want, the police of the world won't be able to find us. Now listen, Crane. I've warned you. I want you to land, because I want to talk. If you don't push your stick down right away, I'm opening fire!"

There was a cold tension in the cabin of the monoplane, but no one spoke. The Skipper gave no order, and George Ayling continued to take the *White King* upwards.

Jim and Buster knew what the Skipper was doing.

He was calling the Boss's bluff, and in a few seconds they would know how serious the croo was. If he meant what he said, bullets would start flying through the air at any moment, and there was no telling where it would end.

The seconds ticked by, endlessly, while the airmen on board the *White King* took their guns from their pockets and waited tensely. What would come now?

CHAPTER XIII

ATTACK!

JIM PENFOLD had never known time pass so slowly. He was staring all the time towards the *Wasp*, trying to make out what was in the hands of the crew. There were three men there altogether, including the Boss. He did not recognise the pilot, but he could see the face of the man Pete —Pete Morgan—against one of the windows.

The *Wasp* was heading straight for them now, and it was obvious that it was much the faster machine. Less than four hundred yards separated them, and they were both still climbing. The height was over twelve thousand feet, and the ice-covered land beneath looked like nothing but a vast stretch of white paper.

"Level out!" snapped the Skipper.

George Ayling obeyed. The nose of the *King* straightened and they flew straight ahead for several seconds, with the *Wasp* on their heels. Even flying straight, however, they could not gain on the other machine, which was getting slowly closer.

Would they fire?

Three hundred yards—two hundred. The two machines were almost within firing distance now, and any moment would tell.

One hundred yards——

Very suddenly, so suddenly that Jim was startled despite the fact that he had been waiting for it, he saw the speckle of yellow flame coming from the cabin of the *Wasp*. He could see nothing else, although it looked as though Pete was holding something against his shoulder.

Nothing happened, but the Professor exclaimed. "They *are* shooting!"

The words were unnecessary. All of them knew what the red flashes meant—all of them knew that a machine-gun was in action against them. The incredible had happened! Here, over the great wide wastes of the Arctic, they were being attacked. Attacked!

Jim did not hear the things at first, or—more correctly—he did not know what they were. Little tapping noises coming from somewhere outside.

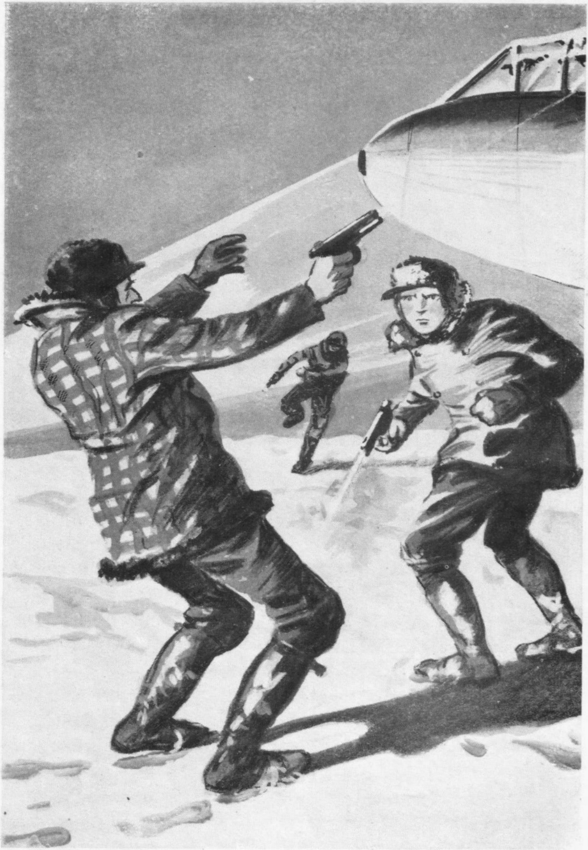
Buster realised what they were first.

"They're hitting us!" he snapped, and then the tapping came more clearly than ever, and Jim realised that the bullets from the machine-gun were tapping into the sides of the cabin and the wings.

Fascinated, and heedless of the fear that was clutching at him, Jim stared out. He saw the little dark things pecking against the left wing of the *White King*, and saw them dropping off, into the eternity beneath them.

Bullets!

Little messengers of death, each capable of killing a man! What would happen if the bullets sprayed into the cabin? What could happen?



JIM AIMED AT HIS KNEES, AND THE BULLET STRUCK HOME! THE MAN GASPED AND STAGGERED BACK, SO THAT HIS BULLET WENT AIMLESSLY INTO THE AIR.

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He felt suddenly enraged, infuriated against the Boss, the man who dared do this thing, and the only idea in his mind was to return the fire. Why didn't the Skipper order the others to shoot? The automatics might score a lucky hit where the machine-gun failed. It was madness not to shoot, madness!

Then suddenly he realised that there was a gun—the Boss's own gun!—in his pocket.

He had forgotten it until then, for he had given little thought to the Boss that day. Now he whipped it out of his pocket, and there was a queer, taut feeling inside him as he pulled at the window of the cabin, intending to open it and take a pot-shot at the *Wasp*. All the time the tapping of the machine-gun bullets came clearly, and the silence was broken only by that and the heavy breathing of the occupants.

Jim had the window half open when the Skipper saw him, and whipped out a cry.

"Jim—stop it!"

Wind was whipping through the partly open window, disturbing Jim's hair, blowing Buster's all over his forehead. But the words were clear enough, and Jim drew back.

"I——" he began, but the Skipper cut him short.

"Don't do anything—anything, understand? —without my orders. We don't want to be crashed!"

"But we must shoot back!" cried Jim Penfold, and he knew that the same thought was in Buster's mind. The Skipper smiled grimly—

although it was strange that he could smile at all in those circumstances.

"All in good time, young 'un. They're still bluffing. If they were aiming at the windows, the bullets would be coming into the cabin by now."

"What about the petrol tank?" snapped the Professor.

"No need to worry about that," the Skipper assured him. "All the metal of the *King* is special, bullet proof steel—not that we expected any bullets. I——"

He broke off, however, for the Boss's voice floated into the cabin again, harsher this time, and with a grimmer note that proved that he was not fooling.

"Crane, I've given you ample warning. If you don't go down, I'll shoot into the cabin!"

So the Skipper had been right.

The first bullets had only been a warning, there had been no deliberate attempt yet to injure any of the crew of the *King*. But all of them realised that the man would not hold off much longer. They were forced now to reach a decision—to fight against the crook, or to land and talk with him. And for the life of him Jim Penfold could not guess what the Skipper would do.

Skipper Crane, as it happened, was forced to come to one of the most difficult decisions of his life.

Had he been on an ordinary flight, he would have taken the chance and fought to the bitter end, despite the fact that the odds were against him. But this was not ordinary.

For one thing, the powerful 'plane was not his own. For another, there were thousands of pounds' worth of expensive scientific instruments on board. And, third, but by no means least, was the fact that in Professor Ray and Dr. Humbolt he was carrying passengers whose lives must not be endangered if it were possible to avoid it.

He had no idea what the Boss was after, although he was afraid that the man wanted to take Jim Penfold a prisoner. Well, if that was the case he would be unlucky.

On the other hand, he might want some information, might prove to be reasonable enough. It was impossible to say, although there was one thing that was glaringly obvious.

Unless he prepared to land, there was going to be death and destruction in the air, and he doubted whether the *White King* would be a match for the *Wasp*. He drew a deep breath, conscious that every eye was on him. When he spoke it was into the transmitter, not to the other members of his crew.

"All right, *Wasp*, I'll land. But at any sign of hostility I'll open fire. Understand?"

Without giving the man in the biplane a chance to answer, he switched off the radio. He had spoken abruptly deliberately, for he wanted the Boss to wonder what he meant by open fire. It would do the man good to think that the *King* was better armed than it really was.

With a tight smile he looked at the others.

"It seemed to be the only way to save bloodshed," he said. "I'll talk with the fellow when we get down. Push her over, George!"

George Ayling pushed the joystick forward, and the *King* began to lose height quickly. On her tail all the time came the *Wasp*, obviously prepared to open fire if the exploration 'plane showed the slightest sign of a trick.

The Skipper was feeling bitter, Jim knew, and he felt bitter himself. Had he not come on this trip, he believed, there would have been nothing like this happening. By stowing away he had risked the lives of the others, laying them all open to danger, and he told himself that he would never cease regretting the fact that he had come with Buster Howell.

But as the Skipper spoke again, he forgot his own worries and self-reproaches.

"When we get down," he said, "you'll come with me, Ken, and we'll talk with the man. George, you and Bert will wait in the cabin, with your guns cocked. Professor, you and the Doctor will please get to the rear of the cabin, away from the windows, in case of accidents. Jim——"

He smiled cheerfully enough, and Jim Penfold felt his admiration for the Skipper go up by leaps and bounds. Moreover, there was not a word of reproach at the fact that he had nearly lost his head and opened fire a few seconds before.

"Jim, you and Buster are going to start earning your keep. It may be that these fellows are after you, but we'll act as if we haven't worried about that. You'll take guns—I notice you've got some from somewhere—and stand at each end of the 'plane. You take the nose, Jim, you the tail, Buster. Just stand there so that we can watch the swabs in front no matter what they start to do. All clear?"

"All clear!" Jim spoke quietly enough, although inwardly he was seething with excitement at the fact that he was actually going to play some part in the defence. Defence! It seemed mad to be thinking like that, although he realised that the word was justified.

Well, they would know what the Boss was after in the next few minutes.

The *White King* was flying now at less than two thousand feet, and despite their predicament, Jim could not stop himself from looking through the windows, towards the ice-bound earth.

To his surprise, it was not flat as he had expected, but bumpy and uneven. It looked, in fact, as though the land had actually been an ocean, that the ice was frozen sea, set in regular wave-pattern. Certainly it looked more like a frozen sea driven before a strong wind than anything else.

Now that they were close, moreover, it was obvious that the whiteness was mostly an illusion, for the ice looked watery and grey. But that mattered nothing now.

He looked up, as the Skipper took over the controls.

"Nasty place for landing," Buster muttered.

"Yes," Jim agreed, "but he'll manage it all right."

They waited tensely while the White King went downwards, now only a few hundred feet from the undulating surface of the ice-field. Here and there were large patches of comparatively flat ice, and the Skipper was obviously looking for piece wide enough for him to land on with comfort and safety.

He found what he was after at last, and circled round for a few seconds. The ice-skids were prepared, and Jim felt a thrill of excitement, not connected with the reason for their landing here, but at knowing that for the first time in his life he was landing on ice.

The field seemed to come up and hit them, and there was a sudden grinding noise, very different from the bumping of air-filled wheels on good brown earth. Ice showered in every direction, even striking against the glass of the cabin windows. And then slowly the *White King* came to a standstill, a perfect landing with hardly a shiver. And, a hundred feet away from them, the *Wasp's* skids touched the ice at the same moment.

They were down, and in a few seconds they would know what the man who called himself the Boss wanted.

. . . . .

Jim and the others were forced to admit that the pilot of the *Wasp* knew his business. The smaller machine landed without the slightest difficulty, and as the cabin door of the monoplane opened, so did that of the biplane.

Both machines were in a line with each other, and there was a stretch of comparatively flat ice, some hundred feet across, between them. Jim told himself grimly that they were within shooting distance, and his fingers tightened round the butt of his automatic.

At school, in the O.T.C., he had handled guns, but he had never dreamed that he might be called on to use one in real earnest so soon. Tense-faced, he waited for the Skipper's orders.

John Crane stood up quietly.

"Right, then. Get to your positions all of you, but don't shoot unless they start, or I shout an order. I'll make myself heard, so there's no need to worry about that."

As he spoke, Ken Wright opened the door wider, and jumped down. He skidded on the slippery ice, saved himself by grabbing at the wing, and then walked a couple of precarious paces forward. Warned by his slip, the Skipper and the two youngsters let themselves down warily, but Buster's heel caught on a bump in the ice and he went sprawling.

"Perishing stuff!" he growled, and his expression was so comical that despite the circumstances the others burst out laughing. But they were serious a few moments later as they took up their position. Jim was at the nose, Buster at the tail of the flying boat. George Ayling and Bert Chase were in the cabin—just in case of accidents the Skipper had made sure that there were pilots aboard—and the Skipper went forward, with Ken Wright's lanky form next to him.

At the same time the Boss and Pete Morgan started from the *Wasp*, while by the open cabin door of the biplane sat a rugged-looking man with a machine-gun perched in front of him.

The parley was starting, but what would happen after it?

Jim, standing by himself, felt strangely lonely, despite the fact that all the others were within easy reach. His hand was cold, although it was covered with a thick, fur-backed glove, and he was wearing a heavy overcoat. It was not so cold out here as he had expected, however—about as bitter as one of the more bitingly cold days in an English winter.

But the cold, the ice, the fact that he was here, on the Labrador coast, everything like that was forgotten. The one thing that was in his mind, the one great question, was what the Boss wanted, and whether he would be demanded as a hostage—whether, for some strange reason, the Boss and the others had flown from England to kidnap him.

It seemed incredible, but that was the only possibility that entered his mind. He waited, tense, expectant, yet half-afraid of what was coming.

While the two leading pilots approached each other over the slippery ice, grim-faced, but without showing their guns. Neither side would open fire while the leaders were in the open: but it was impossible to tell what treachery there might be in the Boss's thoughts.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BOSS'S DEMAND

Skipper Crane hardly knew what was in his mind as he walked slowly but steadily towards the man who had committed one of the worst crimes of the air—piracy against an unarmed aeroplane. There were bitter thoughts against the rogue who dared do this thing, but far more bitter were his thoughts when he wondered what would happen if the man in front of him demanded that he handed over Jim Penfold.

The Skipper knew that there had been many cases of kidnapping in recent years. The children of wealthy folk were kidnapped and held to ransom, which the parents paid in order to save their children's lives. That seemed the only possible solution to this puzzle.

But Skipper Crane had told himself that he would fight against it to the bitter end!

He knew that if he did so it might mean that they would all be killed, but he had to face that possibility. Nonetheless, he hated the fact that this responsibility had been forced on him.

He had played with the idea of sending a radio message, asking for help, but he knew the men in the *Wasp* would have been able to intercept the message, and he was afraid that they would have opened fire with the machine-gun immediately. Whatever happened, that had to be avoided if it was at all possible.

For the first time, he could see the face of the man who called himself the Boss. He saw the dark eyes, set too close together, the dark, swarthy skin—blue with stubble, for the man had not shaved for forty-eight hours—and the tight, cruel lips. Jim Penfold had said that he believed that this man was a killer, and the Skipper was more than prepared to believe it.

Ten yards from the Boss, Skipper Crane stopped. The swarthy faced man followed suit, and they faced each other. There was a thin smile on the Boss's lips, as though he realised that although his party was outnumbered, he held the trump card—the machine-gun.

"Well, Crane?"

He did not raise his voice, but they travelled surprisingly over the icy waste, and to Jim Penfold's surprise he could hear every syllable. Moreover, he could even hear the Skipper's heavy breathing, before he answered.

"Well? Supposing you tell me your name?"

"Supposing I don't?" mocked the Boss. "No names, no pack-drill. Supposing you realise that you're in a hole, Crane, and you can't do anything but obey me."

"That's a matter of opinion," snapped Crane.

"It won't be, if you're wise." Despite his words, however, the Boss's eyes narrowed, and it was obvious that he was not prepared for the Skipper's attitude. His voice grew harsher, and still every word was crystal clear across the ice-field. "I want two things from you, Crane——"

"Name them."

"I'm going to. Don't get too funny, or I'll change my mind and not give you a chance to get away at all!"

The Boss rasped the last words, and the Skipper's eyes narrowed. That meant that the man did not propose to murder them all. And yet——

The Skipper shrugged his shoulders. It was useless to let his thoughts run away with him.

"Listen," he said grimly. "You may think you've got me in a fix because of the machine-gun, but you're not so right. My 'plane is bullet-proof——"

"The windows as well?" sneered the Boss.

"We can keep below the window-level," said the Skipper equably. "And I can last a siege of three or four days. We've goods and provisions to spare, so we're not worried on that score. A message to St. John's, or anywhere like that, and we'd have help within twenty-four hours. Your position isn't so strong as you apparently think."

Each word was very clear, and it carried weight. Obviously the Boss had been counting on inspiring this man with fear, and he had failed badly. But he showed nothing but a tightening of his lips before he answered.

"That's as may be. I'd sooner have a machine-gun with me than help a thousand miles away, and don't you forget it. Listen. I want young Penfold——"

"You can stop asking!" said the Skipper sharply. "I'm not surrendering Penfold or anyone else, no matter what the result of it!"

"The evil you aren't!" snarled the Boss. "We'll see, Crane, and you'll wish you hadn't talked so much before I've finished with you. I'm offering you and the others a chance of escape, understand? I want young Penfold—and I want the *White King*——"

"You want *what?*" gasped the Skipper, and his gasp was echoed by the others, who could hear every word of this strange conversation.

The Boss's little eyes glittered.

"That got past you, didn't it? I want the *White King*, for twelve hours. You can stand by my bus while I take it away, and if you like we'll unload all the luggage. We're not going to run away with it!"

"But why on earth do you want it?" demanded the Skipper, and it was obvious that it was the last thing he had expected. Nor had any of them dreamed of that amazing demand.

"Never mind why, I want it!" snapped the Boss. "And I don't mind telling you this, Crane! I tried to set fire to it the other day, but if I'd known what I know now, I wouldn't have done so. That machine's valuable to me."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Crane. "I'm not letting it out of my sight!"

The Boss hesitated, and when he spoke again there was an inflection of the utmost cruelty in his voice. None of the men from the *King* doubted the murderous nature of the man now.

"Listen, Crane," he said softly, "I've told you what I want, and what I'm going to get. If you start arguing, I'm going to open fire—and if I have to roast you out, I'll get Penfold. Understand? What do you think your men are going to say if I start firing, and you can save them if you'll let the kid come? And what's the matter with lending the *King* to me?"

The Skipper didn't answer for a moment, but when at last he did speak there was no doubting the fact that his words were final.

"Never mind with what's the matter, or what my crew'll think. You've made two demands—and I'm refusing them both. Now what are you going to do?"

. . . . .

The words rang crystal clear across the ice-field, hitting against the ears of all the men who were watching and listening, wondering how this strange drama would work out. They had even forgotten, now the astonishing request that the Boss had made.

Only Buster wondered what was in the *White King* to make the crook want it so urgently, but his thoughts were only fleeting. Jim Penfold just watched, his fingers tight about the handle of his gun, his eyes alert for the slightest hint that the others would start shooting.

The Boss's face was disfigured by a leer, an expression of sheer malevolence. He drew back apace, and his voice was like the slash of a whip.

"You'll regret this, Crane! Listen! Two days ago I was in an Epsom gaol, but they couldn't prove anything against me and they let me go. Since then, I got this 'plane, and I've flown three thousand miles to get at you. I didn't do that for fun. I know what I want and I'm going to get it, or——"

He broke off, and there was hardly any need for him to finish the sentence. But there was a tinge of sarcasm in the Skipper's voice as he snapped:

"Or what?"

"I won't leave one of you alive!" snarled the Boss. "Understand? No one will ever know what happened to you. They'll just think you crashed, and that's the end of it. No one'll ever see your bodies, understand? Your expedition will be smashed, everything will be smashed, unless you give way. That's what I'll do. Now do you understand?"

Jim Penfold could hardly bear to breathe as he heard the words. He was tempted to rush forward, to offer to surrender himself, but two things held him back. First he doubted whether the Skipper—or the others for that matter—would let him. Second, it was obvious that the Boss wanted the *White King* as badly as he wanted his prisoner. Jim could sacrifice himself, but he would still do nothing to save the expedition party.

The only thing he could do was to wait and see what happened. Worried, desperate though he was, he was on the alert all the time, and prepared to shoot if there seemed the slightest sign of treachery.

But the Boss was not prepared to start shooting yet.

He glared into the Skipper's pale face, and for a few seconds the Skipper did not speak. Then his words came out like pieces of ice.

"That's your last word?"

"My last word."

"All right—I'll fight you!"

It was a challenge that there could be no mistaking, and Jim drew a sharp breath. He hardly knew what would happen, he had no idea what course this coming fight would take, but he knew that it would be desperate, that any or all of them might lose their lives.

If only they had had some idea of what the trouble was it would not have been so bad. But there was not the slightest reason, as far as he could see, why the Boss should want the expedition's flying boat. There was ample motive for them kidnapping him: his father was very rich, and would probably pay a large sum for his safety.

But why did they want the *White King?*

It was a question that no one could answer. In fact none but Jim was thinking of it at that moment. All of them were waiting too tensely for the Boss's next words.

They did not come.

Without a word of any kind, the Boss swung on his heel, and started back for the *Wasp*. A second later the Skipper and Ken Wright were making tracks for the *King*, hurrying as best they could over the slippery ice. They had no idea what trick the Boss would try next, and they realised that the quicker they were in the 'plane the better it would be for them.

Almost at the same moment, the Boss and the Skipper called instructions. But the Boss spoke to the man at the machine-gun a second of a fraction before the Skipper, and Jim heard the words

"*Get 'em ready!*"

He had no idea what they meant, and he had no time for puzzling over them, for the Skipper snapped:

"Jim—Buster! Back to the cabin!"

All four of them reached it at the same moment, and they bundled quickly inside. The Boss was already in the cabin of the *Wasp*, and the cabin door was still open when the *Wasp* started forward.

"Quick!" snapped the Skipper to George Ayling, who was at the controls. "Get her up——"

But he was too late: no matter how quickly he had worked, they must have been too late. For the *Wasp* was moving along the ground towards them, with the machine-gun firing all the time. The *tap-tap-tap* as the bullets hailed out came clearly—and then another sound that almost made the Skipper's heart stop beating.

A loud cracking near the cabin, something that seemed incredible, and yet——

Jim and Buster saw it at the same moment, and they could only stand and stare. For the three propellers of the *White King* were smashed—shot through in a dozen places by the machine-gun bullets. They could not get into the air again without fitting the spares!

And it was death to venture outside.

CHAPTER XV

DISASTER

THERE was no sound in the cabin after the cracking had stopped, for the tap-tap of the machine-gun ceased at the same moment. The *Wasp* was still moving towards them on its skids, but fifty feet away the skids left the ground and, swerving slightly to the right, the *Wasp* left the ice.

Bert Chase broke that tense, horrified silence.

"The perishers. But they can fly!"

Ken Wright drew a deep breath.

"They know how to handle the 'plane all right," he admitted. "But I wouldn't like to swerve from the take-off like that. But what the blazes does it matter? Don't you realise what's happened? We're stuck? We just can't move, and those—those devils outside will shoot at us until we're finished—or until we surrender. *We haven't got a chance!*"

The words echoed the thoughts of the others, although no one else had thought of putting them into utterance. The Skipper's pale face was drawn as he spoke quickly.

"Steady, Ken! That won't help us."

Ken Wright swallowed hard, and then turned away.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Again there was silence—a silence of helplessness and hopelessness. None of them had dreamed of the nature of the attack when it came, and they realised they were fighting a man who was at once ruthless and resourceful. He must have planned that carefully, before he had talked, and there had not been the slightest chance of the attack failing.

It was Buster who spoke next.

As the words came from his lips, the *Wasp* had reached a height of a thousand feet or more, flying in a south-easterly direction. It was difficult to imagine what the Boss had in mind, but none of them thought he was going far. Probably, thought Jim bitterly, the man was going to wait until dark, and then make another attack.

But Buster's words drove the thought from his mind.

"Do you know, Skip," the youngster said quietly, "they must want the *King* pretty badly. They didn't do any damage in the air—in other words, they wouldn't crash us if it was avoidable—and they've stopped us going up again. In other words, they don't want a fight up there, even though they would almost certainly win. They want to keep the *King* more or less whole."

The Skipper looked puzzled.

"Ye-es. That's more than reasonable, Buster. But why?"

"I wish I could tell you," said Buster ruefully.

"Doesn't it occur to you," suggested the Professor in his high-pitched voice, "that we have something on board that he wants very badly?"

There was a moment's silence, although the same thought was in all their minds. The Skipper voiced it.

"That's a possibility, Professor. But if that's what they want, why didn't they ask for the thing, instead of wanting the *King* for twelve hours or more?"

The Professor tugged at his beard for a moment, frowned, and then waved his hands helplessly.

"I don't know! It's a preposterous affair, preposterous!"

For a second time the Professor's utterance of that word, with the emphasis that he invariably gave it, brought a smile to the others' lips, and the tenseness eased a little. Before anyone else spoke of the problem they were forced to face, the Doctor said quickly:

"One thing, gentlemen. I would like to place on record the fact that I endorse the Skipper's actions. I think he has taken the only possible course, no matter what happens to us."

"My opinion exactly," said the Professor.

"Couldn't'a done anyfink else," agreed Bert Chase gloomily, "but we ain't arf in a mess, ain't we? What you bin up to, young Jim? Ain't got the crown jools in yer pockets, 'ave yer?"

There was a general outburst of laughter; the atmosphere grew much clearer, and the tension was gone for the time being. The Skipper said quietly:

"Thanks a lot, Professor—and all of you. Now—a plan of campaign. Has anyone any ideas?"

"You'll radio for assistance at once, I suppose," said Dr. Humbolt, whose thick-lensed glasses, reflecting the white ice outside, looked opaque.

"Yes—George is getting the wave-length now," said the Skipper. "We'll say just what has happened, but there's a chance that the authorities will think it's a hoax."

The Professor's eyes narrowed.

"You mean—they might not come?"

"Heavens, no! They'll come all right, but they might wait for confirmation—that is, until they get authority from someone high up. And you know how those people can delay things with their red-tape. I doubt if we can expect the slightest assistance for forty-eight hours."

The Doctor's face hardened.

"A long time, Captain, but you are probably quite right. However, we have ample food and drink. We have only to hold out for forty-eight hours, and there is nothing to fear."

The Skipper looked at the tubby little medico frankly.

"I wish I could feel as happy in my mind about it," he admitted. "But I think we should all face one fact—we are in a very nasty position. We've seen something of the resourcefulness of the man called the Boss, and we can take it for granted that he has another beastly plan up his sleeve. Forty-eight hours is a long time, isn't it?"

"Agreed, agreed!" exclaimed the Professor. "We will have to have regular watches—take every precaution——"

"We'll do that all right," admitted the Skipper, "but whether we can get over the disaster of the propellers going, I don't know. We only carry one spare, and we can't possibly take-off with one engine going, knowing we might have to fight the *Wasp*."

"No reason why we shouldn't try to get the spare on, all the same," said Ken Wright. "Then if luck broke our way we'd have a chance. Fix it to the middle hub, eh?"

"We'll try and get started at once," said the Skipper. "I've been watching the sky line, for I'm half afraid that the blighters in the *Wasp* might be a lot nearer than we think. However, there's no sign of 'em. We'll get going, as soon as you've got the message out, George."

George Ayling, his usually cheerful face set with grave concern, was already talking into the transmitter. He did not waste words, but he stated their predicament badly.

> "Flying Boat *White King* attacked by Bristol biplane *Wasp* Labrador coast, latitude 54.12 longtitude 62.31 further attacks threatened. Propellers shot away, impossible to take off. Assistance imperative. Flying boat——"

George repeated the words a dozen times, over several different wave-lengths, and the very fact that the message was going gave the others hope. Buster and Jim were in the van as they jumped from the cabin again, and hurried to the luggage compartment.

The canvas that had proved so useful to them proved to be draping over the spare propeller, which was carefully packed in rags and oil, with a wooden framework. Despite the cold, which was getting worse now, all of them worked with a will.

It was a strange sight.

The Professor and the Doctor were standing near at hand, hands deep in their fur coats, fur hats pulled low over the ears, and stamping about on the ice in order to keep warm. The others—Bert Chase, Ken Wright and George Ayling, with the Skipper and the two lads—were unmounting the broken propeller, and preparing the new one for fitting.

It was not as easy as it sounded.

They could not work in gloves, for they needed spanners and screw-drivers to get at the screws and nuts with which the mountings had been fastened, and the keen air bit at their bare fingers, piercing them to the bone within a few seconds. They worked one at a time, and sometimes five of them pulled at a spanner three or four times before a nut was loosened.

Already there was a grey dusk across the skies, a fact which worried the Skipper. He knew that as far north as this the summer nights were usually long, and the gloom suggested that a storm was blowing up—one thing that they did not want. On the other hand, it might do more damage to the *Wasp* than it did to them.

Where was the *Wasp*?

They had not the slightest idea of the thoughts in the Boss's mind when he had flown away, and all of them kept glancing towards the greying sky, afraid that the enemy 'planes would swoop on them out of the darkness. There seemed no reason at all why the *Wasp* should have disappeared, unless——

"They've gone for more men," said Jim quietly.

Although no one had been speaking of the *Wasp* for five minutes, all of them knew what he meant. The Skipper nodded.

"That's my idea. More men, or more ammunition, although where they'll get it I don't know."

"Isn't there a place called Hopedale on the coast here?" asked Buster Howell.

"Ye-es. But I doubt whether there will be anything there for them, unless they've arranged for it to be there. Remember they haven't had much time. Hopedale," he added, "is a fishing port, quite a small place, with only a handful of white men. They won't have any luck with recruits there, although—hang it, they've probably gone off for petrol! Why the deuce didn't I think of that before?"

Jim broke in excitedly.

"If they have, the folk at Hopedale will probably have had the wireless message! When the Boss get's there he'll meet trouble——"

The possibility of that development cheered them all, and they worked with a will, surely one of the strangest parties ever working to try and get an aeroplane into flying order. The Professor and the Doctor kept their glasses turned towards the glowering skies, but saw no sign of the *Wasp*.

"And if we don't show lights, they can't locate us after dark," said the Professor. "Can we finish the propellor to-night, Skipper?"

"Not a chance," admitted Skipper Crane. "As it is I'm afraid some of us have got frost-bite. I was going to sound the retreat for the night. Snow's coming any moment, anyhow. Bert——"

"Oke-kay!" said Bert Chase cheerfully. "Tea, I knows!"

He stumped off to the cabin to prepare the evening meal, while the others followed him, banging their hands together in order to restore the almost frozen circulation. Bert had turned on the electric heating in the cabin, and the warmth of the little place seemed to strike them in the face as they entered. They had never welcomed warmth so much in their lives, though, and certainly Jim Penfold and Buster Howell had never enjoyed a meal of fried bacon and tinned tomatoes and bread, washed down with steaming hot tea, as they did that night.

They did not turn on any of the lights, but it was still fairly light outside. As the Skipper had prophesied, the snow had started. Not in great white flakes, but in a fine powder that looked almost like rain, until the wind blew clouds of it across the ice-field, and hurled it against the windows of the *King*.

"The whole thing seems a dream," said the Skipper. "We could have expected this, and —and we'll be having plenty of it—when we've finished with the Boss. But the attack—the whole affair in fact, seems fantastic—yes, I know, Professor! Preposterous!"

There was a general chuckle, in which the Professor joined as heartily as the rest. Moreover, the Skipper's words were true. It seemed incredible to believe that they were unable to take off because of the threat from the *Wasp*, and that an attack might come at almost any moment.

"But it looks as if we've nothing to worry about to-night," said Ken Wright, as the darkness enveloped them. "In twenty minutes they won't be able to sight us, and—Great Scott, what's that?"

He broke off with a shout, and the others swung round in their seats, staring out of the windows. For from somewhere outside had come a roar, like a great explosion, echoing and re-echoing through the cabin. At the same moment the gloom was illuminated with a dull red light, that disappeared a fraction of a second later.

And then it came again, louder, nearer.

A *boom* as loud as the thunder of the first day out, a flash of flame, a rumbling, and silence. And through that silence Jim Penfold's voice came very quietly and coolly.

"Bombs! The *Wasp's* back, and they're bombing us!"

CHAPTER XVI

A DESPERATE SORTIE

Four times in quick succession those bombing sounds came, and the reddish glow followed, reflecting strangely on the finely powdered snow falling from the grey skies. There was not the slightest doubt of what was happening. Jim Penfold was right; the *Wasp* was back, and the crew was bombing the beleaguered party in the *King*.

There had been six bombs in all, and they seemed to have dropped all about them, not all on one side of the cabin. Then the last echoing died away, and there was silence—silence broken only by the heavy breathing of the helpless fliers in the *King*.

None of them had expected this thing.

They had realised that with the machine-gun the *Wasp* had held an almost insuperable advantage. With a lighter 'plane, the Skipper might have made a fight, but with the comparatively awkward and clumsy *King*—made for carrying weights and for speed, not for fighting manœuvres—to have fought in the air would have been suicide.

Once they had landed, it had seemed that they stood a better chance of keeping the enemy off until help arrived, but now they realised that the odds were even more heavily against them. If one or two of those bombs dropped on the cabin of the *King*, or on the petrol tank, there would not be a chance for any of them.

All of them realised it, and they realised also that they were face to face with death, unless they surrendered.

Jim Penfold's eyes were glittering with suppressed emotion as he waited. He would have done anything in the world to have eased the burden for the others, and he would gladly have sacrificed himself, no matter what he would suffer at the hands of the man called the Boss. But if the Boss wanted the *White King* as much as he wanted Sir Arthur Penfold's son, any such sacrifice would be useless.

But something had to be done. Cooped up here, they could not just wait until the end came.

Never before had he appreciated the courage of the men with him so much. Ken Wright's one outburst had been the only protest against the devilish workings of the Boss and his hirelings. And now all of them watched the Skipper, waiting for his words, ready to obey his orders without protest.

But it was Buster Howell who broke the silence.

"Can I butt in, Skip?"

Skipper John Crane nodded.

"Yes, carry on. What's worrying you?"

"We'll be getting another message from the Boss any time," said Buster, "and he'll call on you to surrender. That's right, isn't it?"

The Skipper glanced towards the wireless. "Yes—he'll be talking soon, I'll wager."

"Right." Buster looked much older than his eighteen years as he sat there in the semi-darkness. "If you don't give in, it looks as though he'll blow us to smithereens."

"Well?"

"Let some of us go out," suggested Buster quietly. "Say three or four of us. Then you can surrender. The *Wasp* will come down, and take the *White King*, not realising that there are several of us still to be reckoned with. We can jump to the attack when he's sitting pretty. That might work, mightn't it?"

The Skipper's eyes narrowed, but the Professor spoke first.

"An excellent idea, excellent, my boy!"

"Ye-es," admitted the Skipper. "I'll take off my hat to you, Buster, you're not short of ideas. But three of you out there might freeze to death within a couple of hours. It's perishing cold, you know. Besides—they'll know some of us are missing."

"We can take a chance with the cold," said Buster quickly, "and they'll realise why some of us are missing if Jim's not here!"

There was a momentary silence. Jim was trying to follow his friend's reasoning. One thing was certain: it was better to take any chance, providing it gave them something to do, than to stay here and wait.

"You mean, they'll think we're trying to save Jim at all costs?"

"Yes." Buster's eyes were gleaming now, for he was carried away with enthusiasm for his plan of campaign. "And if I go with him, he'll know that there are the two youngsters, and perhaps one of the older men. He won't think there's much to fear from them."

Again there was a silence, broken this time by Dr. Humbolt, whose eyes were glittering behind those thick lenses.

"Skipper, it's not my place to interfere, but I think Buster's idea is a good one. In fact the only one. I will, if necessary, accompany them."

The Skipper shook his head at that.

"Thanks, Doctor, but you're too precious to lose. The only doctor we have, you know! But I think you're right about the sortie. Get some provisions packed, Bert, and plenty of thermos flasks! Ken, you'll look after the youngsters—if they need much looking after! Get the guns loaded and take plenty of spare ammunition. I'll have to trick the devils, but they wouldn't hesitate to trick me, and we can't help that. I——"

He broke off quickly, for at last the expected voice came through the ether—the next message from the man who called himself the Boss. His voice was rasping, mocking, and it was obvious that he did not expect another refusal to come to terms. Bert and Ken listened while they hurried with their preparations, and the two lads, filled with excitement at the part they were going to play, hung on to every word.

"Crane, I'm here again, as you'll guess. I've loosed half-a-dozen playthings, but if you hold out any longer I'll drop a hundred! There won't be anything left of the *King*."

"I thought you wanted to borrow her?" snapped the Skipper.

It was strange to think that the men in the *Wasp*, flying at least a thousand feet above them, could hear the words clearly, but that fact was lost in the tenseness of the general situation.

"I'll take a chance that there'll be enough left for my purpose," said the Boss. "Now, I haven't time to argue. Shall I come down, or shall I bomb you to blazes?"

The Skipper's voice quivered, and the others knew that he was acting superbly.

"I'll make one bargain with you," he rasped. "If you must have the *White King*, all right. I'll sacrifice that, to save our lives. But I'm not letting you have Penfold!"

"How're you going to avoid it?" sneered the Boss.

"I'd rather trust him with Providence than you!" flashed Skipper Crane. "I'll send him out. You'll have to guarantee that you stay here only so long—say twelve hours. That's my last offer, and you can take it or leave it. Remember this, whoever you are! If you commit murder, you will have the police of every country in the world after you!"

Again there was silence, but they could hear voices muttering in the cabin of the *Wasp*. Then the Boss came again.

"All right, Crane, I'll take you! The kid'll probably freeze to death, but that's your lookout. I'm going to come straight down. Switch your searchlights on, and remember if you switch 'em off at all I'll bomb you."

"I won't switch them off," said the Skipper coldly.

As he finished speaking, he switched off the transmitting force, and swung round to the others with his eyes gleaming.

"Not even a lie," he snapped. "They'll know I wouldn't let you go out alone, Jim, and they certainly won't expect you to come back ready to fight. Bert—how about that tea? Ken, you ready? I want you out of here before you get shown up in the flare of the searchlights."

"I'm ready," said Ken Wright, and Bert Chase had the thermos flasks filled, and was stuffing them, with the other provisions, into the haversacks that each one of the three members of the forlorn hope would carry. In each pack was a warm sleeping bag lined with fur, provisions, axes and various oddments that would be badly needed if they were away for several days.

Buster and Jim strapped their packs on, and Ken Wright opened the door. A gust of snow-laden air swept in, giving some idea of the freezing coldness outside. But none of the three hesitated for a second. They did not even shake hands, for every second was precious.

"Good luck!" cried the Professor, and the others echoed his words, while Ken slipped outside first, and the two lads followed him. Within five minutes of the talk with the Boss, the trio was stumbling through the darkness, towards the tail of the *White King*. The snow was driving into their faces, almost blinding them, and their feet slipped on the treacherous ice-surface, but no one seemed to worry.

Their breath froze as it came from their nostrils and their lips, and already they could feel the cold seeping into them. If they stood still for long, without moving, they would be frozen where they stood.

But they were inflamed with hope, and determination. It was impossible yet to say how they would be able to help the others, but they were determined, no matter what happened, to do that—to save the *White King*, and to prevent the Boss and his men from escaping.

Suddenly there was a great white glow from behind them, and they knew that the searchlight of the *King* had been switched on. A few seconds later the glare of the headlight from the flying *Wasp* carved its way through the darkness, while they could hear the droning of its engines.

But they did not wait to see the other 'plane land.

They pushed on, glad of the need for walking to keep themselves warm. The wind was blustering about them, and the snow seemed to be getting thicker. It had at least one good effect. For the time being it made the ground easier to grip, although when it grew thicker, walking would be a hundred times more difficult.

That didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the fact that they were there to save the *White King* and her crew, and to smash the evil plans of the man who called himself the Boss.

. . . . .

The five men left in the cabin of the *King* saw the searchlights of the *Wasp* getting brighter and brighter as the other machine landed. In the glare they could see everything very clearly, for the *Wasp* landed in the path of the *King's* light, with the two searchlights facing each other.

The Skipper, watching closely, saw the three men come down from the *Wasp* and saw, also, that another was left in the cabin. That meant that somehow or other the Boss had succeeded in getting more men.

Another mystery, but that could wait.

The machine-gun was of the Thomson sub order—a machine not unlike a heavy rifle. But it could fire hundreds of shots instead of one, and was one of the most deadly weapons imaginable. One hail, well-directed, could have wiped out the crew of the flying boat in a few seconds.

Carrying it was the man named Pete Morgan—they recognised him from his broad shoulders, although he was well wrapped up in heavy furs. The Boss and a tall, thin man was with him, and they hurried across the snow-covered *tundra*. Obviously they suspected a trick, for the gun was trained on the *King's* cabin all the time.

The men in the cabin were all standing up, but none of them moved. The door was shut, now, but as the Boss reached it Bert Chase leaned over and opened it.

With his thin lips twisted in a smile of triumph, the Boss jumped into the cabin. His little eyes darted to and fro.

"Sent the other kid with him, eh? Two lives on your conscience, Captain Crane!"

"That's my business," Crane said stiffly, but inwardly he was exulting, and the Professor had to camouflage an exclamation of surprise and pleasure in a well-feigned sneeze. For the Boss thought only two lads had gone—he did not know that Ken Wright was with them!

The man made it clearer a few seconds later, and he made something else clear—something that seemed to freeze the crew of the *King* as they stood staring at him.

"They won't get two miles on a night like this, Crane. But thanks for saving me the trouble of shooting 'em. Listen! I want the *White King*, and I'm taking her to Europe, understand? Bluffed you nicely, didn't I? And I certainly don't want the police of every country after me, Mr. Clever Crane! I won't have them either, because they won't know anything about it. They won't be able to hear the story from dead men, will they?"

For a few seconds there was silence. And then the Professor's high-pitched voice came, laden with fear.

"But—but you said——"

"Never mind what I said!" snapped the Boss, his automatic pointing towards the bearded Professor. "I can't afford to let any of you go, understand? You fell for my bait beautifully, and now you're going to suffer for it!"

CHAPTER XVII

A TERRIBLE PREDICAMENT

SKIPPER JOHN CRANE stared at the man who had spoken, hardly able to believe his eyes and ears. It seemed impossible that any man could be so villainous as the Boss threatened to be, and yet the expression in the swarthy man's little eyes boded ill.

All the time, Pete Morgan kept the gun trained on the five members of the crew of the *White King*. If one of them moved it would mean instantaneous death, and they stood there like images, aghast at the words that had been uttered—words that seemed a veritable knell of doom.

The Skipper spoke at last.

"I'm warning you that you would never escape from the law," he said, with a calm that the other admired. Not by a flicker of an eyelid did the Skipper reveal the fear and horror that he felt. "I should think twice, if I were you."

"But you're not me," sneered the Boss. "I've got it all worked out, and I know just what I'm going to do. And in case you think I'll relent, listen to this. No one in England knows who I am—I gave the police a false name, and no one suspects me. Right. If I let you go, the first thing you'll do when you get back to

England is to tell the police all you know about me, and Pete here. You'll give a perfect description, and there'll be a hue-and-cry for me. I won't have a chance, understand? But if you can't talk, no one will know——"

"You seem to forget that I've wirelessed a message," snapped the Skipper.

"I know, I heard it! No names in that, were there? And the name of the *Wasp* can easily be altered. No, I've nothing to worry about once I've put all of you away. I know what I'm doing, Crane, and I'm not hedging, understand?"

Once again there was a tense silence. All the members of the *King's* crew were aware of their dreadful predicament—worse by far than they had ever dreamed. The man in front of them was a callous murderer, who would stop at nothing to make sure that he got what he wanted.

None of the five waiting men thought, just then, of Buster and Jim, with Ken Wright. Had they done so, the howling of the wind and storm outside would have made them afraid that the Boss was right, and that they would be unable to keep going more than a couple of hours. The icy coldness of the Arctic regions would get into their bones, they would wander about helplessly until they collapsed, and then——

Already the Skipper had told himself that it had been madness to let the others go, but now he knew that it would make no difference.

The end would have been the same in any case.

Slowly the words came from his lips.

"You cold-blooded devil! You'll suffer for it, I promise you!"

The Boss's laugh was cruel.

"Yes? Maybe I will, but I'm not worried about it. Now listen, I'm not wasting time. Turn round, all of you!"

The Skipper hesitated, his eyes blazing. And suddenly the Professor felt that he could stand the strain no longer, and with a harsh cry he threw himself forward towards the man who called himself the Boss. There was a sudden *hiss!* from the Boss's gun, a silenced automatic, and a bullet bit into the Professor's chest. The tall, bearded scientist gasped, and then collapsed on his face. He lay there motionless, and there was a dreadful fear in the hearts of the others—a fear that he had been killed.

But now there was no mistaking the deadly seriousness of the Boss. They had to obey his orders, or they would be shot like dogs! Even as it was it seemed that there was no chance at all for the expedition party to escape with their lives.

The Skipper's lips tightened as he turned round. Bert Chase, George and the Doctor followed suit. They were breathing hard, for not one of them knew what to expect, and they all feared another of those murderous bullets.

But that was not the Boss's immediate intention.

"Push your arms backwards!" he ordered, and the helpless crew of the ill-fated *White King* obeyed. A moment later the third man of the attacking party stepped forward, and began to fasten thin cords about the wrists of the explorers. He made quick work of the task, and within five minutes all of them were standing there with their hands fastened behind their backs.

The Boss chuckled. Was it possible that such a devil could live in human form?

"That's fine. Now I've been thinking, Crane. It'll be as well if you aren't shot, just in case some of the people from St. John's come in response to that message. So I'll send you all for a nice walk, see? Perhaps you'll meet your precious Penfold and the other kid. And maybe they'll untie your wrists, but I don't think it's likely. Understand?"

The Skipper did understand.

Right to the last he had believed that this could not be true, and that the man who called himself the Boss would not murder them all in cold blood. Yet now the man's intentions were obvious. He was going to drive them out into the blizzard, with their hands fastened so that they would be stumbling to and fro, absolutely helpless. In that icy blast and the driving snow they would not be able to keep their feet more than twenty minutes or so, perhaps even less. And after that——

It was George Ayling who made a last, desperate effort to stop the man from carrying out this wicked crime—a crime that was reminiscent of the cruelties of the redskins in North America, hundreds of years ago.

"Listen, you fool! The *King's* propellers are smashed, you can't take her up!"

The Boss laughed again, and they realised that nothing would stop him from carrying out his purpose.

"Can't I? You've got one spare, and that'll be enough to get me part of the way. I can get others fitted—you can do everything with money, Crane, and I've plenty of money. Now no more arguing. Get outside!"

In the minds of all five men there was a feeling that they had done the wrong thing, that they should have fought this battle with guns, heedless of the odds. Better by far to have died fighting than to have suffered this dreadful fate. But the Skipper had never dreamed of what was in the Boss's mind; he had not conceived of anything like this. His sole idea had been to save their lives, and now——

It was Bert Chase, his face twisted in contempt, who started for the cabin door. It was difficult to climb out, with his hands fastened behind his back, but he managed it somehow. Moreover he stood there, waiting for the others, and helping them to keep their feet as they landed.

The wind and snow whipped into their faces, almost blinding them, but they could not stand still. All four of them plunged forward, hopelessness in their hearts, while in the cabin of the *White King* the Boss and his two hirelings bent over the outstretched Professor, to see whether he was alive or dead.

The Boss gave no further thought to the helpless men he had driven outside. In the morning they would be just lumps in the snow, probably within a hundred yards or so of the aeroplanes. It would be easy then to cut the cords from their wrists, and if anyone ever found the victims of his wicked crime, it would be believed that they had wandered through the blizzard and come to a tragic end.

The Boss chuckled to himself. He had the *White King*, and that was all that mattered. There seemed no way in which his plans could be upset.

. . . . .

To Buster Howell and Jim Penfold it seemed that they had been out of the aeroplane for hours, although actually it had been less than ten minutes. They made very slow progress, and the white glare from the two searchlights was still plainly visible. But they could make out little, for the driving snow was like a white blanket through which the lights shone eerily.

Ken Wright was a foot ahead of the youngsters, his mind working fast. And he was thinking the same thing as the youngsters.

The storm was much fiercer than he had expected, and he did not think there was much chance of them keeping going for long. In view of that, it would be madness to get too far from the aeroplanes.

He called a halt, suddenly, and his voice was hushed. Although the others were within a yard of him, all they could see was the blurred outline of his fur-coated figure.

"We're not going far in this," he muttered.

"My idea too," admitted Jim, banging his arms against his chest. "It's perishing. But—we can't go back yet."

"It's a pity we ever started," grunted Buster Howell bitterly. "I wish I'd never let the idea enter my head!"

"Don't be an ass!" exhorted Ken Wright. "It was a smart one, and it might prove useful even yet. The storm's worse than we expected, that's the devil of it. Anyhow, if we have to keep walking round in circles, we're not going out of the sight of the lights."

"Any chance of building any kind of shelter?" asked Jim, with a vague idea in his mind that the Esquimaux were experts in building igloos, or ice-huts. The pilot shook his head, and in the darkness his lips were curved in a smile. There was no limit to the optimism of the youngster!

"'Fraid not, Jim. We haven't the tools, and we don't know how! Now—turn left and let's get moving again. We'll freeze up if we keep still too long."

"Any plans in your mind?" asked Jim eagerly.

Ken Wright, his lanky form looking unusually broad in his furs, shook his head.

"Nothing definite. Anything brooding in yours, young 'un, or is it too cold to think?"

"Nearly," said Jim, as they started to walk in a circle about a hundred yards from the place where the two aeroplanes were landed. "The Boss won't be able to take-off at all to-night, will he? And he'll have to clear the snow off the *Wasp* before he starts in the morning."

"Right," admitted Ken.

"Well, if we get as close as possible, close enough to see inside the cabin of the *Wasp*, for instance, we might have a chance of doing something. The big idea when we came out was to make some surprise attack in the morning. Well, the nearer we are the better—and the quicker we try the better! Supposing, for instance, there was a chance of going for 'em in half an hour or so. Would you do it?"

"Would I do it!" exclaimed Ken Wright. "Just give me half a chance and I'll show you! But with the blizzard blowing there isn't a chance."

It was impossible to see the way in which Jim's lips were set in an obstinate line, but the expression in his voice made Ken Wright smile.

"I don't agree," Jim protested. "With the blizzard, we can get a lot nearer the *Wasp* than we could without it. And we might catch 'em on the hop."

There was no sound for several minutes, apart from the heavy thudding of their feet on the snow-covered ice, a sound which was quickly swallowed up by the roaring of the wind about them. It seemed almost as if Ken Wright had not heard the youngster, but he quickly proved that he had done so.

"Great Scott, Jim, you're right! Now's the time to move, not in the morning!"

"You mean you'll chance an attack?" snapped Buster, his eyes glowing.

"We'll get as close as we can, and see how the land lies," said Ken Wright. "Aim for the glow of light over there, but for heaven's sake be careful! And keep your hands in your pockets, round your guns!"

There was hardly any need to exhort them to take that precaution, and they pressed forward, filled with a sudden excitement and eagerness. The prospect of wandering about in the blizzard would have ben a fearful one to any soul, but now there was a chance of quick action the whole position was changed. They had no definite plan of campaign in their minds. In fact it would have been impossible for them to have arranged anything beforehand, but they determined that, if there was a ghost of a chance, they would start trouble.

They had no idea that even at that moment Bert Chase was dropping from the cabin of the *White King*, and that in five minutes all the er members of the crew would be walking oss that storm-swept waste. They might have anged their plans had they done so, but for the time being all they worried about was action. A surprise attack—but one which might not come off—one which might end in absolute disaster.

Yet none of them thought of that as they neared the glow that came from the two searchlights. They thought only of success—the success of a forlorn hope!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COUNTER-ATTACK

ALL about them the snow was driving in the teeth of the wind, sometimes swirling as the wind changed direction, and seeming to blow from all directions. The thick blanket of snow already covering the uneven ice-field deadened all sounds, and made the going softer although slow—too slow for Jim's liking.

He tried to push on, but suddenly his foot stubbed against a lump of ice, and he went sprawling. For a moment he lay there, dazed and winded. Then he tried to scramble to his feet, but he found it almost impossible to gain a footing in that treacherous snow.

For a moment he was filled with a dreadful fear—that the others would not miss him. But after a few seconds in that white wilderness, he saw Ken Wright's figure loom up, and heard the flier's voice.

"Trying to run out on us, young 'un?"

"That put the wind up me," admitted Jim as the other helped him to his feet. "More haste less speed, I suppose."

"Yes. And you must keep close, Jim. We don't want to be separated."

There was no rebuke in the words, but Jim coloured. He realised that it had not been fair of him to hurry ahead, for he might have given the others a great deal of anxiety, besides lessening the chances of a successful attack. Tight-lipped, he marched beside them.

Now the white glow was very clear, and yet Jim and Buster could not help wondering whether they would be able to get close enough to see anything. The snow blinded them. Even at two yards they could not see clearly.

They had no idea how long they had been walking, but they were quite close to the *Wasp* or the *King* now, and vaguely they could make out the blazing circle of the searchlight. Ken pulled them up.

"Steady now. I——"

Before he went on, however, Buster's words ripped from his lips.

"Ken—the snow's easing off. Look!"

He pointed towards the light of the aeroplane, and suddenly the others realised that he was right. For they could make out the wings and the nose clearly now, and instead of being like a thick white blanket in front of them, they could see the snow-flakes, bigger now but coming down much less heavily.

"And it's the *Wasp!*" snapped Ken. "Here's our chance—the last thing I expected. Get going—bending low as you run, and aiming for the tail."

Neither of the others hesitated, for they saw what he meant. Whether this was a temporary lull in the snow or not, they could take advantage of it by seeing how many people were inside the

Wasp. Moreover, they could get close without being seen, and they would be able to take full advantage of the surprise.

They half-ran and half-walked towards the tail of the *Wasp*, and as they went the snow fell even less heavily, and they could make out every line of the snow-covered biplane in the reflected glow of the searchlight. Moreover, the cabin lights were on, and suddenly Jim's lips tightened.

"Ken—only one man in there!"

Ken Wright pulled up short, and then he saw the truth—there was only one of the Boss's men in the cabin. The others had gone to the *White King*. His eyes were glittering as he went forward.

"Spread out a bit—two yards away from each other. Keep your eyes open towards the *King*, Jim—they might start back any moment."

Stretched out as they were, the three members of the sortie crept towards the biplane, and all the time the single man there was leaning back in his seat, apparently convinced that there was not the slightest danger. Jim was within ten yards of the cabin and the others were even closer before the man moved.

Then he shifted his position, and as he did so he caught a glimpse of the three attackers.

In a flash he was up, and they saw his hand go towards his pocket. But Ken Wright did not hesitate. He touched the trigger of his gun, and a bullet stabbed out. Once—twice—thrice! the bullets sped, each one accompanied by a foot long stab of flame, and each one echoing sharply through the cold night air.

The first bullet missed its mark, and the man in the biplane fired once. The bullet ploughed through the snow only a few inches from Jim's right foot. But Ken's second shot took the other through the right shoulder. Vividly they saw the gun fall from his nerveless fingers as he staggered.

"Now run for it!" roared Ken, and the others were off like hares towards their objective.

They knew that no matter where the Boss and Pete Morgan were, the shots would have been heard, and they would not have long to prepare a defence. But luck was with them still, for the single occupant of the *Wasp's* cabin had struck his head on a seat as he fell backwards, and he was half-conscious when Buster Howell reached the cabin.

He was two yards ahead of the others, and he had the door open by the time Ken rushed up. Ken took a flying leap into the cabin, half afraid that the man might be planning some trick, but he saw in a flash that the single enemy was helpless for the time being.

Jim and Buster followed him into the cabin quickly, and Jim banged the door to. Ken snapped orders without hesitating.

"Keep your gun out, Jim, and watch the front. Buster, look both sides as well as you can. I'm going to make sure this fellow can't do any damage."

He swung round as the others took their posts, and in a couple of minutes the Boss's man was bound hand and foot, and unable to move. He was a big, hefty-looking ruffian, who kept moaning about his shoulder, but Ken saw it was no more than a flesh wound, and nothing to worry about. He stemmed the flow of blood and tied a handkerchief round the wound before sitting the man in a seat, and swinging round to Jim Penfold.

"Seen anything at all?"

"Nothing," said Jim, flushed with a tremendous excitement. "We've got 'em, Ken!"

"Not so fast," warned Ken Wright. "They must have heard the shots. It's a pity they were fired, but there was nothing else we could do. Now listen—one of us has got to get out and see what's happening over at the *King*. Who's volunteering?"

"I am!" cried Buster and Jim as in one voice.

Ken chuckled. It was surprising that they should be able to laugh, and to act normally, in the circumstances, but it proved beyond all question of doubt that their nerve was good.

"Toss you for it," offered Jim.

"Taken!" said Buster.

He slipped his glove off and took a coin from his pocket. It spun in the air, and then dropped softly on to the furred back of his other glove. As it fell Jim called: "Heads!" and a moment later he chuckled as he saw the head uppermost.

"My job, Ken. What do you want me to do?"

"Just get as near the *King* as you can," said Ken Wright. He spoke easily, for he did not want the others to realise how risky he feared the job would be. He had not dared to go himself, for it was essential that now they had possession of the enemy's 'plane, there must be a pilot in it all the time, and he could not reasonably expect Jim Penfold to take the 'plane up, even in emergency. "Go carefully, and take no chances. All I want is to see what's happening, and who's in the 'plane. Got it?"

Jim nodded coolly enough.

"All O.K.," he said. "Supposing I meet anyone. What do I do?"

Ken Wright's face was very grim.

"There's only one thing to do," he said. "Shoot. Aim at the legs rather than anywhere else, but don't hesitate. Remember it might be a question of your life—or theirs."

Jim's eyes were narrowed, and he nodded without speaking. He turned towards the door, but before he reached it he heard Buster's sudden exclamation.

Both Jim and Ken Wright swung round, half afraid that the other lad had seen someone outside. But it was inside the cabin where Buster was looking—towards something on the floor at the far end. His words came quickly.

"See that, boys? A machine-gun—a Tommy! We're as well armed as they are!"

The discovery of the wicked-looking machine-gun, with its container filled with bullets, cheered the trio immensely. They would no longer be fighting at a considerable disadvantage, even if the Boss or one of the others had taken a machine-gun with them. The odds were easing out.

Jim turned to the door again, pulling on his gloves as he did so. Once more the biting wind seemed to freeze his face, but the snow had practically stopped, and in the glare of the two headlights it was strange and white, an eerie scene that would remain on his mind for ever.

"Good luck!" breathed Buster, and then the door closed.

Jim Penfold hurried from the aeroplane, for he was anxious to get into the gloom so that he would be less easily seen from anyone who might be approaching. His heart was beating faster than usual, and his eyes were gleaming. He was on his own now, and he knew without being told that on him the whole success of the counter-attack might depend.

Although it was still dreadfully cold, the lack of the snow made a world of difference. He realised that but for the blizzard they would not have been likely to have made the attack on the *Wasp* for some hours, and he knew that the snow had been a blessing more than a hindrance. But the battle was a long way from over.

His mind was filled with a dozen thoughts, mostly of the rest of the crew of the *White King*. How was the Skipper getting on with the Boss? What was happening over there?

But all the time another question kept pushing itself forward. No matter how hard he tried he could not force it out of his mind, although he knew that by himself he could never learn the answer.

Why did the Boss want the *White King?*

The crook had gone to enormous lengths to get the other 'plane, and it was obvious that its capture was more important to him than the kidnapping of the lad. What strange thing was in the flying boat? Something vital, something probably worth a great deal of money: of that Jim was certain.

Although these thoughts were rushing through his mind, he was not careless, and his eyes were wide open all the time. He was perhaps a hundred feet from both 'planes, and the glare of the searchlights did not worry him. They carved two great streaks of light through the darkness, but on either side the gloom was almost impenetrable, and Jim was well hidden by the shadows.

He could make out the outline of the *King* clearly enough, but he could not see into the cabin. Tensely he crept forward. He would approach from the side, of course, but the light from the *Wasp's* searchlight made it impossible for him to make sure that he would not be seen. But there was little fear in his heart, only a great anxiety to see what had happened, or what was happening.

Crouching low against the snow, he neared the *King*. Now he could make out the engines, the broken propellers, and the partly fitted middle propeller. And the light was shining from the cabin roof.

Jim's heart almost stopped beating.

At first he was hardly able to believe that it was true, but he knew it was a fact, and he could not avoid it. There was only one man in the *King*, and that was Pete Morgan. There was no sign of the five members of the expedition party!

So great was the shock that Jim stood up for a moment, and he had to fight hard to prevent himself from rushing forward to see what was happening. It was as well he forced the temptation back, for suddenly he caught a glimpse of something moving on the far side of the *King*, and as he narrowed his eyes and peered across that sea of light, he recognised the Boss!

And the crook was going towards the *Wasp!*

Obviously he had heard the shots, and he was going the same way as Jim, approaching the other 'plane furtively, to see what had happened there. Jim's lips tightened and his fingers clutched at his gun. The Boss was within range, and Ken Wright had said in no uncertain fashion that he must shoot.

Shoot—at the legs!

Jim levelled his gun, and touched the trigger. The shot rang out, loud and clear, flame stabbed and the bullet hummed across the white expanse of snow. But even as the echoes went careering round the voice came to Jim's ear, a harsh, guttural voice with a message that could not be mistaken.

"Drop that gun, little fool!"

Jim swung round, and as he did so he saw the tall fellow within a couple of yards of him, and he saw the automatic in the other's hand.

CHAPTER XIX

TOUCH AND GO

JIM had no idea that there were more than three men in the *Wasp* now, but that did not worry him at the moment. He thought of nothing but that the man was standing there with his gun trained, and that he could shoot before he could touch the trigger of his gun.

Jim hesitated.

The man was tall, and what he could see of his face was villainous. He would not hesitate to shoot—any more than Jim would have hesitated had the situation been reversed. Jim started to loosen his hold on his gun.

And then he saw the man glance across the dazzling sea of light towards the Boss, who was hurrying across.

Jim didn't hesitate now. Just that fraction of a second made all the difference, and he touched the trigger of his gun. The tall crook saw what was happening and fired on the instant, but he was a fraction of a second too late.

Jim aimed at his knees, and the bullet struck home! The man gasped and staggered back, so that his bullet went aimlessly into the air.

At the same moment Jim jumped forward, and as he did so a bullet hummed past his ear—a bullet from the Boss's gun!

Jim's mind was ablaze, now. He had only a few seconds in which to think and to act, and he had to do something that would beat the Boss off. He fired twice, but the bullets missed, and the Boss was firing back, the shots coming perilously close. But the crook was doing a wise thing, that saved him from being hit and yet at the same time prevented him from taking careful aim.

He was zig-zagging to and fro as he approached Jim.

The lad hesitated. Out here, by himself and without the slightest chance of help, he hardly knew what to do. But he realised it was madness to stay and wage battle. By now Pete Morgan was out of the cabin, and already the *tap-tap-tap* of the machine-gun bullets were spitting out.

Jim did the only thing, and swung round, racing for the *Wasp*.

Had there been a chance of assisting the Skipper he would not have retreated, but the Skipper and the others were missing. He thought nothing of that or of anything, however, as he pounded over the powdery snow towards the *Wasp* and Ken Wright. All the time bullets were striking the ground close to his feet, and once something seemed to stab through his leg like a red-hot needle. He staggered, saved himself from falling, and continued that headlong rush. It was the merest scratch, and he thought no more of it.

Would he get through?

The Boss was close on his heels, and the other crook was not far behind. The weight of the Tommy gun, however, stopped Pete Morgan from making the speed he would have done otherwise, and that was a big point in Jim's favour.

The biplane loomed up, less than fifty feet away. He could see Ken Wright crouching by the open door, and Buster crouching just behind him. Then suddenly Ken touched the trigger of the machine-gun he was holding.

Bullets roared out, and flame stabbed. Jim actually heard the little leaden messengers of death hurtle past his ear, but more joyously he heard the Boss swear, from behind him, and he knew that the man was either hit, or so scared that he was giving up the pursuit. A second later the latter idea was confirmed.

"Get back, Pete!"

Pete Morgan's gun was working fast, but it stopped now. Ken also stopped firing when he saw the two crooks had been driven back. Only the thudding of Jim's footsteps echoed through the silence, for the wind had dropped almost as quickly as it had started.

Jim reached the *Wasp* and willing hands hauled him in. For a few minutes all he could do was to lie back in a seat, gasping for breath. The rarer air of the north made running difficult and breathing painful during exertion, but he quietened up at last.

Ken was bending over him, and Buster was keeping a careful watch. Ken's voice was anxious.

"What did you find, young 'un?"

Jim gasped the words painfully.

"No—one—there. Empty!"

For a moment Ken Wright just stared down at the youngster as though he could not believe his ears. And then the full importance of the thing seered through his mind, and his expression was bleak.

"The—devils! That means they've turned the others loose—probably without arms. We must try and find them!"

. . . . .

"We must try and find them."

The words echoed and re-echoed through Jim's mind, and through Buster Howell's. The full significance of what Ken Wright said came slowly, and they were startled, horrified at what it might mean.

And yet—was it possible to find them? Dared they make an effort to search through these icy wastes by night?

Jim knew the danger that would be bound to attend such an effort, and yet he knew that they must try. He was horrified at the thought of the Professor and the Doctor, with the others, out on the frozen *tundra*. Probably, too, they had been walking—stumbling was a better word—through the worst of the blizzard.

Thank heavens the storm had blown itself out!

The silence in the cabin dragged for several minutes. No one felt like speaking, for no one knew just what to say. Then Buster spoke, without turning his head.

"Who's going, Ken?"

It was a question typical of the youngster who had shown his courage in no uncertain fashion a dozen times, and who had travelled half-way round the world as a stowaway. His voice was steady, and the normal way in which he spoke did a great deal to ease the tension. Jim felt steadier now.

"Have to be you and me, Buster," he said quietly.

Ken Wright's eyes were narrowed.

"No, Jim. I'm going this time——"

"But, Ken—you must stay here! You might have to take the 'plane up in a hurry—you've got to keep attending to the wireless. Neither of us can do that!"

Ken Wright hesitated, his thoughts bitter.

He knew that the youngster was right, and yet he hated the idea of letting the two lads go out alone, in yet another forlorn hope. They were too young for the dangers and hazards, and yet——

They had proved themselves men, in more ways than one, and they had all the courage in the world. Moreover, they were capable of tackling an emergency. It would be madness for him to leave the *Wasp*, while there was another thing.

Two of them would have to go out. He dared not let one go alone, without any idea of what direction he was heading for. Then that meant only one man could be left at the *Wasp*, and he knew that it was his task—the task of a Captain at the helm. He drew a deep breath.

"It's the devil! But you're right!"

"If we had some idea where they'd gone, it would help," said Buster, drawing on his gloves. "I—look-out! There's someone coming!"

All three of them grabbed their guns, and for a moment they were convinced that the man staggering towards them was the Boss, or one of his hirelings. But a few seconds later they realised the truth. It was the Doctor!

His lips were open, and he was staggering forward, as though he would drop at any moment. Buster jumped out of the 'plane to help him, while the others watched in case of a sudden attack from the Boss. Nothing happened, however, and the Doctor was hauled into the cabin.

Ken Wright slipped a small whisky flask from his pocket and pressed it to the man's lips. The Doctor's face was blue with cold, and he was shivering violently. But the thing that made the others tighten their lips was the fact that his hands were bound behind him.

Jim cut through the cords, and within five minutes the medical man was sitting up, with a little colour in his cheeks. Buster did not take his eyes off the dazzling expanse of snow ahead of them, but there was still no sign of the Boss or his men coming to the attack.

"Try and speak," urged Ken Wright. "What happened, Doc."

Doctor Humbolt's voice came jerkily.

"They—bound us—and sent us—out. I lost—my way. Saw the lights—didn't care what happened—just came. Can—you—help them?"

"We'll do our damnedest!" snapped Ken Wright. "What direction did they go?"

"Turned left—from—*King*," gasped the Doctor. "All—keeping—together!"

"Fine!" Ken pretended a cheerfulness that he did not feel. He knew that if any of the others had collapsed during the blizzard, and it was quite possible that they had, if they had been crumpled on the snow for an hour or more there was little or no chance of them being alive. But he did not suggest that to the youngsters.

"All ready, Jim? And you, Buster?"

"All fit," the youngsters assured him.

"Carrying torches?"

"Yes."

"Off you go, then!"

They all spoke cheerfully, just as if they were going to an afternoon's ramble or picnic. But both lads felt very tense as they climbed from the *Wasp*, for they realised the possibility that the Boss or one of his men was in the shadows, watching every movement.

The fact that the Doctor had not been fired on, however, suggested that was not the case, and they could only hope for the best. They hurried to the rear of the *Wasp*, rounding it towards the left, and then struck a course midway between the *Wasp* and the *King*.

The snow was freezing hard, and it crunched loudly under their feet, but the going was fairly easy. They did not walk too fast, for already they knew how easy it was to be fatigued out in those cold regions, and they wanted to reserve their strength as well as they could.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, and they realised with a shock of surprise that nearly four hours had passed since the *White King* had landed. Four hours! Was it possible that so much had been crammed in so short a time?

Without a word to each other, but plugging along shoulder to shoulder, they went forward. Now they were completely surrounded by the darkness, and the lights of the two aeroplanes showed hardly at all. They had no idea how fast they were travelling and, what was worse, they could not be sure that they were heading in the right direction.

They must have been a mile from the aeroplanes when Jim spoke, the first time the silence had been broken.

"Better start using the torches, Buster."

"And shouting," agreed Buster. "I doubt whether the Boss will hear us now, and if he does it can't be helped. Just a single shout, at intervals. Shall I start?"

"Right."

Buster raised his voice, a loud cooee that echoed about the ice-field and seemed to echo for minutes all about them. At the same time Jim stabbed the beam of his torch about, but all it lit on was the glittering snow. He shouted a few seconds afterwards, and then they called at regular intervals.

No sound came in reply but the echoes.

The minutes dragged by. Their feet were beginning to ache, their eyes were heavy now with sleep, and with the strange white glare that rose from the ground, despite the darkness. But they went on without hesitating for fifteen minutes. Then Jim looked at a compass that Ken had given him.

"Better turn south," he said, and try a quarter of an hour in that direction."

Buster nodded. Together they turned towards the south, cooeeing as they went, but gradually feeling that there was little or no hope of finding the members of that ill-fated expedition.

A quarter of an hour travelling south brought them to another halt. Jim spoke this time.

"East for ten minutes, eh?"

"Yes," said Buster shortly. Neither of them felt like talking, for their throats felt dry and constricted with the constant shouting, and their voices were getting lower. They shouted at less frequent intervals, and started to join together, to give greater volume to their cries.

And then suddenly as the echo of a call died down, they heard another, weaker cry, from somewhere ahead of them. There was someone else here! Their efforts had not failed, unless——

Unless the Boss had tricked them, but they could only wait and see.

CHAPTER XX

AN EPIC JOURNEY

THE eyes of the lads gleamed with new hope as they hurried in the direction of the sound. Only once did they pause to send out their call, and once again the responding cry came, from somewhere quite close to them, and a little to their right. Their torches were stabbing through the darkness now, and they knew that if by chance if was the Boss, bullets would soon be flying.

But none came, and they realised that the likelihood of the Boss risking himself or one of his two men out here was very slight. Excited at the prospect of finding the Skipper and the others, they hurried forward.

Their beams shot forty feet ahead of them, and they kept moving them in wide arcs, to make sure they missed nothing. But even then it was a shock what at last the light showed on the upright figures of a man—and the outstretched bodies of two others on the snow-covered ice.

Neither of them spoke as they dashed forward. Soon they were able to recognise the man who was standing. The Skipper!

Skipper John Crane was swaying on his feet when the lads rushed up. His hands were fastened behind him, and he was so cold that he could not find words. Words were not necessary as Jim slashed the cords that bound his wrists, and Buster took a whisky-flask from his pack, and pressed it to the Skipper's lips.

The whisky did the airman a great deal of good. His voice croaked through the silence.

"Thank God you've come! We couldn't have lasted another half hour!"

"All's well that ends well," said Jim quietly. "How—how long have they been out?"

"Ten minutes—or so." The Skipper still spoke with difficulty, and he was forced to stand there as the lads bent over the prostrate figures of George Ayling and Bert Chase.

The two assistant pilots were stiff with cold, but they were just conscious. They had stumbled against a mound of ice and had been unable to regain their feet. Certainly the rescue party had arrived only just in time!

But whisky, which Ken Wright had supplied, did a great deal to warm them. Nonetheless, George Ayling could not stand when at last they tried to get him to his feet. His legs from the knees downward were absolutely numb, and he would have fallen again had Jim not supported him.

The Skipper was speaking more easily now. "How far is it, Jim?"

Jim hesitated. He was tempted to lie, to tell them it wasn't far, but he decided that it would be wiser to tell the truth.

"At least an hour's walk, Skip."

Crane's expression was gaunt.

"An hour, is it? Well—I think I can manage it. How about you, Bert?"

Bert Chase grimaced, but he was swinging his arms to and fro, and getting the blood circulating through his body again.

"Reckon I can, just abart," he muttered.

"Then that leaves—George," said the Skipper in a low voice. "I——"

"We'll carry him," said Buster Howell quickly. "Luckily he's not a big fellow——"

George Ayling spoke quickly. His senses were alert enough, and it was just a fact that his legs were so cold that he could not move them.

"Nonsense! Leave me plenty of whisky and rugs, and come back in the morning, when you can see."

It was a heroic thing to say, for George must have realised that the chances of his living through until the morning were very slim. But Jim Penfold spoke promptly.

"That's a poor idea, George! We can manage you easily. Skipper, if I tell you what course we took, can you lead the way?"

"Yes." The Skipper didn't hesitate, and his eyes gleamed as Jim revealed his compass.

"We came for thirty minutes due east—thirty south-east, fifteen due south and about ten minutes west. Is that all right?"

"Enough to get going on," said the Skipper with confidence. He seemed much more himself now, although he was still weak with exhaustion, and the lads knew that neither he nor

Bert Chase could possibly help to carry George Ayling.

They did not expect them to.

Buster started first, for it was surprising what strength there was in his wiry body. Jim helped to hoist George Ayling on his friend's shoulders and then they started on that epic journey—three exhausted men, and two lads who had never before faced the biting cold of the Arctic regions.

Through the thick snow they pressed onwards, with the Skipper walking ahead with the Cockney, and the two lads bringing up the rear. Buster carried the helpless pilot for ten minutes, and then rested. Jim took the burden, and although for the first few seconds the load seemed comparatively light, he knew within a short time that it was going to be a ghastly journey.

Every muscle in his body was straining and aching as he staggered forward, but not until the ten minutes were up did he stop. As he put George down, however, his back seemed to split with a sudden stab of pain. He grunted, but hid the fact with a well-feigned cough, but his back was aching terribly as he started off again.

By the time he was due to carry George he was feeling better, but he wondered how long it would be before he had to give in. Buster was obviously in the same boat, and the Skipper saw it quickly.

"Better make a chair," he suggested. "It will be slower, but easier. I wish to heaven I could help!"

"And me," grunted Bert Chase. "But, crikey, I 'ardly know 'ow to move one foot afore the other, Skip. Same wiv' you?"

"Just the same," agreed the Skipper.

"If I get them perishers, I won't 'arf lay into them," said Bert Chase darkly.

At another time the expression in his face would have brought a chuckle of laughter from the others, but there was no time and no spirit for laughing now. It was a grim, bitter struggle. If they failed to reach the *Wasp* they would be finished, for George certainly could not move alone, while at any time the others might collapse.

The cold was dreadful, piercing their heavy furs, and making their hands and feet ache with an excrutiating pain. But, carrying the helpless pilot between them, the two lads pushed on. Their breathing was short and jerky, time and time again they stumbled and all but fell. Only an indomitable spirit kept them moving.

Onwards-onwards!

They must reach the *Wasp* before dawn came, otherwise they would be helpless in the hands of the Boss. And even in the darkness, the nearer they drew to the aeroplanes, the more desperate their position grew. For none of them could have shot straight, none of them were in any shape for a duel with guns.

For nearly two hours they stumbled on, resting from time to time, walking like sleepwalkers, hardly knowing their direction, hardly caring what happened.

Then Bert Chase suddenly staggered, and before the Skipper could save him, he dropped to the ground.

When the Skipper bent over him, it was obvious that the Cockney was unconscious. The strain had been too much for him, and he had collapsed with exhaustion. The others stopped, grim-faced.

"I'll have to try," muttered the Skipper.

"For heaven's sake leave me!" gasped George Ayling. "I'll get the use of my legs back soon, and——"

"We're going together," said the Skipper quietly, and the lads nodded. George Ayling shrugged his shoulders. The Skipper hoisted the unconscious Bert up and half-dragged, half-carried him onwards.

Could they last out?

The one great fear in their minds was that they had lost their way, although no one voiced the possibility. The darkness ahead seemed impenetrable, without a break.

And then Jim Penfold stopped dead still, almost making George fall as he did so.

"Listen!" he cried.

The others strained their ears, and in a few seconds all of them heard the thing that had struck Jim. There was an aeroplane engine roaring somewhere ahead of them!

"No one can fly in this," gasped Jim.

"They might," said the Skipper grimly,

"but it's more likely that Ken switched the engines on to guide us!"

The words filled them with a new hope, giving them a strength they had not believed that they possessed. They pushed onwards, and all the time the roaring of the aeroplane engine was in their ears. There was no doubt now but that it had been started on the ground, and that it was still in the same position, for it had been going for ten minutes or more, getting slightly louder but not as loud as it would have done had it been in the air.

Then they saw the dim glow of light, breaking through the darkness ahead of them. Tense-faced, they staggered onwards, until at last they could make out the shape of the biplane and the flying boat. Jim muttered an explanation—until then the Skipper did not know that they had captured the *Wasp*—and they made for the enemy's 'plane, a tremendous thankfulness in their hearts.

That epic journey was over, and they had won through! Ken Wright and the Doctor—almost recovered now—helped them in to the cabin, and in a few seconds the scene there was like an emergency hospital. But the glowing heat helped quickly to revive the fliers, and hope was renewed.

Their one fear was that the Boss would start attacking again before they had recovered, but they had three hours more of darkness left, and they were hoping desperately for the best.

. . . . .

The cabin of the *Wasp* was much smaller than that of the *King* and it was crowded with all the members of the expedition party. For half an hour at least only the Doctor and Ken Wright were able to do anything, although the lads were keeping a look-out, and wondering what was preventing the Boss from making an attack.

Obviously, thought Jim Penfold, he was waiting for the light of day.

He would have no idea that the others had been rescued, and that would be a shock for him, Jim told himself grimly. But for the fact that Ken had switched the engines on, he doubted whether the rescue would have succeeded, for all of them had been in a bad state before that signal had come, and they might easily have given up the struggle before they saw the glow from the searchlights.

But why was the Boss doing nothing?

Jim could not imagine what was keeping the crook away, but an idea suddenly swam through his mind. The Boss did not seem likely to make an attack to-night, and probably he was resting. Well—why shouldn't the *Wasp* go up?

They had a tommy-gun now, and they also had several dozen of the bombs which had been dropped by the crooks. Moreover, the *White King* was only just able to get up, on its one engine, and that would not be in working order until the next morning.

Jim swung round, his eyes blazing.

"Skip—why don't we take off now? We could scare the life out of 'em!"

Skipper John Crane drew a deep breath. He had been relaxing, feeling the pain of the chill still in his bones, but feeling much better than he had done. Only Bert Chase and George Ayling were helpless now—the two who had suffered more than anyone else from the exposure.

"I'd give a lot to, Jim," admitted the Skipper. "In fact I might do, yet. But you've forgotten the Professor."

Jim stared.

It was a fact, although it hardly seemed credible. He had not realised that the Professor was not with the party!

"Then—then what happened?" he gasped.

The Skipper explained quickly, and added:

"So he might be only wounded, and he is certainly in the *King*. If we go off, anything might happen to him."

Jim was silenced, for that was a predicament that he had not suspected for a moment. Yet it seemed madness not to be able to take advantage of the situation.

The Skipper broke the following silence.

"This is my idea, young fellow. We'll wait until morning, and then talk to the Boss. We've got the upper hand now, and he must realise it. We'll demand the Professor, and then we'll offer him a couple of hours to make good his escape——"

"In the *White King?*" gasped Jim.

The Skipper's lips were set tightly.

"No, on foot! We'll give them food and provisions of all kinds, which is more than they gave to us. It's their one chance, and if they're wise they'll accept it. Thanks in the main to you youngsters, we've won out. They'll have to do what we tell them——"

"Supposing they don't?" demanded Buster Howell.

The Skipper shrugged his shoulders.

"Then they'll answer to the police. I've radioed again, as you know, and there will be another 'plane on the way pretty soon. In fact it's probably left St. John's. We'll just have to wait, and prevent the crooks getting away."

Jim had not realised how completely they had the upper hand, and he felt cheered. There seemed no prospect now of the Boss escaping, and it seemed likely also that the Professor would be saved, providing he was still alive.

Moreover, it would be safer to take off in daylight than in the darkness. Everything considered, Jim thought, things had worked out well for them. Now all he wanted was sleep.

He fell asleep quickly, and Buster followed suit. They did not realise that the others took turns to keep awake and watch through the long night hours. But dawn was grey in the skies when at last they awakened, and there was a tremendous hope in their hearts.

"Nothing happened?" Jim demanded as he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Nothing at all," admitted the Skipper. "Now we'll talk to them by radio!"

He switched on the radio, and called the *White King*. After a few seconds the Boss's harsh voice answered him. Briefly and concisely the Skipper laid down the terms on which he would allow the others to escape, and the men in the *Wasp* waited tensely to hear what the crook said.

The Boss's voice seemed different now, and they believed the man was afraid.

"Listen, Crane, we won't have a chance out on the ice!"

"Did you think of that last night?" demanded the Skipper.

"I—but listen, I'll come to terms!" shouted the crook. "Give me a couple of hours to move, Crane."

"Why do you want the time?" flashed the Skipper.

"Until it gets properly light," gasped the man in the other cabin, and it seemed to the men in the *Wasp* that he was in the throes of real fear. The Skipper grunted.

"All right. Two hours—at eight o'clock—you're going to move. Don't try any tricks, or you'll regret it. How is Professor Ray?"

"Not badly hurt, I swear!"

"If he's hurt when we find him, we'll start after you right away," said the Skipper grimly.

He closed down the set, and looked round. There was relief on the faces of the other six men, and all of them agreed that the Skipper was wise to give the crook a chance of a getaway.

Had he refused, it would have meant a fight and more bloodshed, and that was the last thing that they wanted.

After two hours they would radio St. John's, telling them what had happened. After that——

"On with the expedition!" cried Buster.

But Skipper Crane frowned.

"I'm not so sure, young 'un. We'll have to see how the Professor is, and it looks as though we'll be postponing the expedition for a few weeks. Anyhow—we want to know why the crooks wanted the *White King*."

That question at least was the most important one in Jim Penfold's mind. He could not conceive of any reason for the affair, although in the next two hours he thought of every possible motive. As eight o'clock grew near, however, he forgot that in the excitement that filled them all.

Would the Boss carry out his bargain?

It wanted five minutes to eight when the next thing happened—and the last that they had expected. They saw an aeroplane flying towards them, getting lower and lower, and the same thoughts were in their minds.

"A rescue 'plane already!" exclaimed the Skipper. "That means we can't let the Boss go, and——"

But he stopped a moment later, and he roared an order to Ken Wright, who was sitting at the controls.

"Start her up, Ken! The devils are after us!"

And as he spoke the newcomer roared over the *Wasp*, bullets spitting from the machine-guns poking from the windows. At the same moment the Boss's voice came viciously into the cabin.

"Thought you were clever, Crane, eh? Well, you were wrong—these are my men!"

CHAPTER XXI

BATTLE IN THE SKIES

FOR a few seconds the men in the *Wasp* could hardly believe the truth, but there was no doubting it. Somehow the Boss had arranged for reinforcements, and he had played for time as cunningly as might have been expected from him. Now the odds had veered round again, and the chances were against the expedition party.

There was no doubt that if he could the Boss would murder them in cold blood. And the 'plane in the air—a biplane built on exactly the same lines as the *Wasp*—held a tremendous advantage. Bullets sprayed through the safety-glass of the windows, drilling small round holes, and the little lumps of lead dropped to the floor of the cabin.

Could they get up, or would they be disabled as the *White King* had been?

Ken Wright was pressing the starting button, but after the intense cold of the night the engine was sluggish. But for the fact that it had been running so long as a direction signal for the lost party, it would not have started at all.

First one, then the other engine burst into life, and as it did so the other biplane turned a screeching bend and came hurtling towards the

Wasp. Bullets were pouring from its machine-guns, and there was no doubt but that the pilot wanted to annihilate the men in the *Wasp*. But Ken Wright's sudden release of the brakes, sending the *Wasp* sliding forward, robbed them of the chance.

The bullets pecked into the ice behind them as the biplane moved on its skids in the direction of the *White King*. The second attacker—so low was it that Jim and Buster could read the name *Sprite* on its side—had flown well past, and was banking steeply to turn. But before it could come again the *Wasp* would be in the air.

They waited, tense, expectant, half-fearful.

Taking-off from the ice was at all times a risky business, and to take off in haste like this might bring disaster. The ice was skidding from the blocks, hitting up against the cabin sides, and as Ken pulled back on the stick the machine seemed to skid and lurch towards the right.

For a dreadful moment Jim Penfold thought they were going to crash, but with a stupendous effort Ken straightened the 'plane out, and they left the earth!

But the *Sprite* was on their tails again, and it seemed impossible that they could all escape from the hail of bullets that were rattling down. It was coming from behind them, travelling twice as fast as the *Wasp*, and Jim could see the faces of the three men in the cabin as they leaned out, two firing automatics and one at a Tommy gun.

Ken Wright did the only thing possible, and took a chance. He tickled the rudder-bar, and sent the *Wasp* screeching round towards the left, even though it was only a hundred feet clear of the ice. If a single thing went wrong they would crash, and there would not be far enough to fall in order to give them a chance of recovering. But the gamble came off. The bullets whipped viciously past them as Ken straightened out again, and then pulling well back on the stick, let the throttles all out.

The air-speed indicator quivered towards the two hundred miles an hour mark, and for the moment the *Sprite* was left behind. It had been in the middle of a turn, however, banking, and therefore travelling slowly. Now it hurtled towards the *Wasp*, ready to join battle, ready to send them crashing.

But the crew of the borrowed 'plane realised that they had an equal chance.

The odds were no longer against them. They were in the air and more than a thousand feet up, now, while their speed was as fast as the *Sprite's*. Moreover, they had an equally strong selection of weapons.

The Skipper voiced the general feeling.

"Not much to worry about now. You feeling all right, Ken, or shall I take over."

"I'm used to these buses," said Ken Wright, and the Skipper nodded, prepared to let the other man take them through the battle. He knew that Ken had spent years in the Royal Air Force and had had a thorough training in aerial warfare.

And that was what this promised to be.

A battle in the air, with the odds even this time, and without the need for parleying or for giving ground. They were flying practically the same height as the *Sprite*, and for a few seconds it would be a struggle to get higher, for the 'plane flying at the greater altitude had the advantage.

Nearly half a mile separated the two 'planes, and for a few seconds it looked as though the *Sprite* was going to fly away. But it turned round, banking all the time, and then came at them.

Tense, expectant, the men in the *Wasp* waited.

No one looked outside, no one was interested in anything apart from the attacking 'plane. Explanations could wait until afterwards. The job for the moment was to crush the *Sprite*. If they failed, they themselves would be smashed. It would be a battle to the bitter end: no one doubted that for a moment.

Only three hundred yards between the two 'planes now. They were both climbing, both about the same height. The Skipper's voice came out harshly.

"Buster and Jim—the right side window. Bert, use the machine-gun, with me here."

He stepped to the left window, and Bert Chase—who had used machine-guns frequently in the past, followed him. At the other window the two lads waited, desperately anxious for a chance of sending lead into the cabin of the

Sprite. At the rear of the cabin sat George Ayling, who could still not use his legs, and the Doctor. Both men held guns and would be prepared to use them if the emergency arose.

Two hundred yards.

One hundred.

With a terrific roar, the engines of the *Sprite* seemed to merge with those of the *Wasp*, and then the two 'planes were at grips. They were flying dead level, and the *Sprite* would pass on the left of the other biplane—just where the Skipper wanted it.

The cabin of the biplane echoed with the *tap-tap-tap* of the machine-guns, the spitting of automatics, and the pecking of the bullets that entered through the open windows and the safety glass. There was a haze of smoke and a strong smell of cordite in the air, but as far as they knew no one was hurt.

For a split-second they could see inside the cabin of the *Sprite*, which was less than thirty yards away. They saw the red flame belching from the machine-gun, saw the vicious expressions of the crooks. Then the two 'planes passed, roaring away from each other.

"Swing her round!" roared the Skipper.

He was anxious to get on the tail of the *Sprite*, before the enemy 'plane had a chance of turning, and he did not look towards Ken Wright at the controls. But Jim Penfold did and what he saw mad a shoot of fear go through his heart.

"*Skip!*"

With that single cry, Jim darted across the cabin. For Ken Wright was slumped forward over the controls, and it was obviously that he was badly hurt, for there was an ugly patch of red at the side of his head. Jim hardly realised that as he reached the controls, and at the same moment the *Wasp* lurched clumsily to one side.

They were losing control!

In another two seconds they must have started a dreadful tail-spin that would probably have sent them crashing, but Jim's presence of mind saved them. There were dual control seats, and he dropped into those next to the unconscious pilot, and worked desperately at the rudder-bar.

The *Wasp* was quivering like a live thing. For a moment it seemed impossible to stave off the disaster, but gradually Jim regained control, and sent the bus hurtling forward. He could see in the mirror in front of him that the *Sprite* had turned and was climbing fast. He pulled back on the stick, to follow suit, for he realised that if the other 'plane fired down on them again there was more than a chance of them crashing.

The Skipper was next to him a moment later, and his words sent a flush through the lad's cheeks.

"Rattling good work, Jim, I couldn't have done better myself! All right, I'll take over."

Jim slipped out of his seat, and the Skipper took his place. Meanwhile the Doctor and Buster were easing the wounded Ken out of his position, and carrying him towards the end of the cabin.

Jim had no idea how badly Ken Wright was hurt, and he had no time for asking questions.

For the *Sprite* was five hundred feet higher than they were, and flying towards them again. It would be impossible for them to get up to the same altitude. The bullet that had wounded—or perhaps killed, Jim thought grimly—Ken Wright, had given the enemy a chance of finishing off the battle.

The Skipper might have decided to turn and run, but he did not. He knew that he carried a heavy load, and that there was a tremendous responsibility in what he did, but he hesitated not for a moment. If he tried flight, he knew the other machine would come after him, and there was more than a chance that with a lighter load the *Sprite* would prove the faster machine.

He went onwards, pulling back a little on the stick, and snapping orders as he did so. Bert Chase was bending over the Tommy gun, his lips set grim, and the battle was on again a moment later, with the bullets from the enemy thumping downwards to the *Wasp*. Bullets rattled on the roof, crashed through the windows, beat a ceaseless tattoo against the sides. All the time Bert Chase was shooting upwards, but his bullets were striking the metal of the undercarriage and rebounding. Smoke and flame seemed to fill the air.

Suddenly Bert Chase gasped, and staggered backwards. But for Jim's presence of mind the man would have fallen, with the Tommy gun. Jim lowered him gently and then took the gun, stepping to the window quickly, fearlessly. Their chief hope was in the Tommy, and he *had* to use it. Bert and Ken were hurt and unconscious, the Skipper was almost exhausted. They had to end this desperate battle quickly, or their chance would go.

But it was impossible to be sure that they could win. The odds had veered again in the enemy's favour, and a few seconds might see them crashing to the barren ice below.

CHAPTER XXII

CRASH!

In the few moments' respite that came as the *Sprite* flew over the *Wasp*, Jim Penfold and Buster Howell were able to glance about them. The Doctor was working quickly and unhurriedly on the wounded men, while George Ayling was hoisting himself over the back of a seat, so that he could get near one of the windows and play his part.

Buster gave him a hand immediately.

"Hard going, young 'un," smiled the pilot. "But we'll get through. Lucky this isn't the *King* or we'd have been in the cart a long time ago."

Buster nodded. He realised that the sortie of the previous night had saved them and given them this chance of fighting in every way. But for it, they would never have stood a chance. Yet the fact that he had made the suggestion did not seem to cross his mind.

"Have they turned yet?" snapped the Doctor from the floor.

"No." It was Jim who answered. He was following the flight of the *Sprite* closely, and he realised with relief that they were having a breather. "They're stalling for a bit—perhaps they've had an injury."

"I hope they've had a hundred," said the Skipper quietly. "They're certainly doing something—try the glasses, Buster."

As he spoke the Skipper was sending the *Wasp* upwards at an angle of forty-five degrees, flying as fast and as high as he could. The enemy 'plane was half-a-mile away—only a few seconds' distance, actually, but enough for them to breathe in.

Buster took some glasses from a shelf near him, and trained them on the *Sprite*, which was flying almost parallel with them. He could see inside the cabin clearly, and a grin suddenly split his lips.

"They're changing pilots! One fellow looks right out!"

"Our first blood," muttered the Skipper. "And that man was a good pilot. I wonder what the other'll be like. Get ready all of you, we're going after them!"

For the first time since the air battle had started, the *Wasp* was taking the offensive. Flying perhaps five hundred feet higher than the *Sprite*, the Skipper levelled her out and started to race in the direction of the enemy 'plane. At one window Jim crouched with the machine-gun in his hand—George Ayling had shown him how to use it, although it was simple enough—and at the other George and Buster were waiting.

The distance seemed to disappear in a split-second, and the new pilot of the *Sprite* showed that he was no greenhorn. He started to bank immediately, but he was a fraction of a second too late.

The *Wasp* was there!

Again bullets bumped from the one 'plane to the other, and in front of their eyes they saw the holes leaping in the glass, saw them bouncing off the sides, saw the man with the *Sprite's* machine-gun sway backwards, steady himself again and start firing. And then they were over the *Sprite* and banking steeply to swing round and try to finish the enemy off.

Could they do it?

The gun was hot in Jim's grasp, but he hardly realised that. With a wonderful dexterity the Skipper took the *Wasp* round in a short semi-circle, and still the biplane was beneath them. Again the lead pumped out, the cabin was filled with smoke and the smell of cordite, the little *tap-tap-tap* of the gun.

The man at the *Sprite's* gun had his face streaked with blood, but he did not give up. They were brave: there was no question of that. And in order to swing round the Skipper had lost a little height. They were almost level, and the bullets were cracking through the glass again—

"*Ahhh!*"

The cry of pain forced itself from Skipper Crane's lips, and Jim Penfold caught a glimpse of the Skipper sprawling forward over the controls. At the same moment the *Sprite* flew off, obviously wanting another spell.

"Thank heavens for that!" muttered Jim.

He knew what this development meant, but he did not flinch for a moment. Snapping a request to Buster, he passed over the machine-gun and leapt to the dual-control seat. Luckily Crane was leaning back, and not touching any of the controls, and Jim switched them over to his set quickly.

But the *Wasp* was falling again, threatening to go downwards nose first in a terrifying tail-spin. And the youngster, who sat tight-lipped at the controls, had never before been asked to take a machine solo.

But he knew that he could do it.

He did not panic, but he eased the joystick backwards, putting on all speed as he did so. Slowly, agonisingly, the *Wasp* straightened out. It quivered from time to time as though shaken by a giant hand, but it was going steadily at last.

Jim glanced at the *Sprite*.

It was coming at them again, which meant the pilot and the gunner had not been seriously hurt. Although it was a hundred yards or more away its single machine-gun was spitting fire, and the bullets were falling short.

"Go for 'em, Jim!"

Buster shouted the words as he waited tensely for a chance of shooting. Jim Penfold grunted, and did not hesitate. He sent the nose of the *Wasp* towards the enemy 'plane, crowding on all speed. He aimed a little towards the left of the other machine, so that Buster with the machine-gun could do the damage.

Zoooooom!

The din from four roaring engines merged together again in a deafening clamour, and then they came within shooting distance. Jim was fully aware of the tremendous responsibility that was his, for if they were badly hit he would have to try and take the 'plane down by himself.

But he concentrated on dodging the *Sprite.* He pulled back a little on the stick, to roar above them if he could, and waited. Seconds seemed like minutes, minutes like hours in that grim, relentless battle in the skies. And then Buster Howell, firing like mad, saw the man at the controls of the *Sprite* collapse helplessly over the joystick, he saw the gunman swing round and reach desperately for the controls.

All the time he was firing and bullets were pumping into the enemy's cabin. The *Sprite* seemed to rock suddenly, and then in a flash it had dropped out of sight!

Buster held his breath. Jim's eyes were gleaming, and there was a song of thankfulness in his heart. The others were going down!

"It might be a trick!" he muttered aloud, but in his heart he did not believe it. And a few seconds later he knew that it was not true.

The *Sprite* was going downwards, in a tail-spin from which there could be no recovery. They could see it whirling round, the smoke from its exhaust like a great grey streamer. And then, when it was a thousand feet beneath them, red flames speckled with the grey.

The enemy 'plane was in flames!

The flames shot hundreds of feet into the air from the doomed 'plane, which dropped so dreadfully to its end. Jim held his breath as he saw it nearing the earth.

And then the crash came.

There was a *boom!* that reached the ears of the men in the *Wasp*, a tremendous cloud of smoke billowing outwards, and pieces of iron and steel flying in all directions. A split second later the grey smoke disappeared and all that was left of the *Sprite* was a mass of roaring red flames.

The fight was over, and the *Wasp* had won.

Jim Penfold straightened out the *Wasp*, but for a few seconds he could not start to go downwards. He felt sick at the terrible death that the men in the other machine had met, yet he realised that only by luck had they avoided the same fate themselves. It was like all fights—death for one, triumph for the other.

And yet he felt horrified at the thought of what had happened. Supposing they had lost?

He wrenched his mind from that possibility quickly.

Buster had drawn away from the window, his face white and drawn. Then suddenly he put the machine-gun down, and picked up some glasses. He stared out, towards the east and in the direction of the *White King*. To the naked eye it was little more than a dark blotch against the grey ice, but through the glasses the machine was clear enough.

So were the men standing—or working—by it.

Buster's lips tightened. The horror of the thing he had just seen—and which he had helped to do—disappeared. For perhaps three seconds he was rigid, and then he swung round to Jim Penfold, his eyes blazing.

"Jim—get after 'em! They're fitting the propeller!"

For a second or two Jim and George Ayling hardly realised the significance of what was happening, but in a flash they saw the truth. The Boss had been trying to get the *King* in shape for flying, and unless they landed quickly, he might yet be able to get away.

Jim's listlessness disappeared.

He swung the machine round, handling her like a master, and dropping height quickly, flew direct for the clearing where the *White King* was standing. He could see now that the Boss, Pete Morgan and the other man were making desperate efforts to get the job finished, and suddenly he saw them leave the propeller and dash for the cabin.

"They're ready!" muttered Buster between clenched teeth. "Hurry, Jim, hurry!"

Jim was doing everything he could to get down, but he was still at three thousand feet. If the engines of the *King* started off without trouble, then it might mean yet another duel in the air.

He realised that if that happened, the *White King* would almost certainly be smashed. It had nothing like the easy manœuver ability of the *Wasp*, while its only engine would not give it a speed of much more than a hundred and fifty miles an hour, if as much. But to crash the *King* meant to crash the Professor, who was on board, together with all the luggage and instruments of the expedition.

He must stop them getting away!

But something developed then that made them forget the seriousness of the possibility of the *King's* escape, turned Jim's cheeks pale, and made George Ayling and the Doctor gasp. For the two engines of the *Wasp* suddenly spluttered, turned over smoothly for a few seconds and spluttered again.

They were failing!

For a split-second Jim stood like a carved image at the controls. He knew what had happened, and he felt a dreadful helplessness. It was one thing to handle a machine in going order, and another altogether to try and glide down.

But if they landed at all it would have to be by gliding or by crashing, for those spluttering engines told the horrible truth. They were out of petrol! There wasn't a chance of getting down with the engines ticking over.

And even if they got down, without serious damage, the *White King* would escape and they would have no means of stopping it.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST FIGHT

JUST for a few seconds Jim Penfold's mind seemed to stop working. And then it flashed into going order again, and he saw the whole position clearly. He knew, moreover, that the one thing of importance was for him to get the *Wasp* down if it was humanly possible.

They were flying at about fifteen hundred feet, and it would be impossible to climb. But he straightened the machine out gently, giving hardly a thought to the possibility that they would sway too far right or left, and topple over.

He dared not think of failure.

Fifteen hundred feet between them and safety —fifty or sixty seconds, perhaps, and they would know whether they had won or lost. He kept there, cool-headed, grim-faced, without flinching from the task with which he had been so suddenly confronted.

Near him, George Ayling saw that the lad was capable of the job, and he made no comment, gave no advice. But he realised also that the finest pilot in the world would not be able to guarantee a landing.

None of them were looking at the *White King* now. All eyes were on the pilot. The engines had stopped altogether now and the silence seemed deathly.

Slowly, agonisingly, the *Wasp* lost height. Once she swayed perilously towards the right, but Jim brought her straight again without jerking. A jerk then, a hasty movement, would have sent them crashing.

A thousand feet. Nine hundred. Eight——

Still that strange silence in the cabin of the *Wasp*, still every eye was on the youngster at the controls. There was a bead of sweat at his forehead, and his neck felt clammy, but otherwise he was as cool as ice.

Swaying gently from side to side, the *Wasp* lost height. There were less than five hundred feet now. Four hundred——

The ice-field seemed to be moving slowly towards them, and they could see the way it rose up and down in that odd, wave-like formation. Less than a quarter of a mile away, moreover, they could see the *White King*, still on the ground. But the *King* was almost forgotten.

Three hundred feet——

"We'll do it!" gasped Buster, and there was a tremulous smile at his lips. "We'll get down!"

But even as the words came, it seemed that he had spoken too soon. For the wind, that until then had been facing them, suddenly changed. The *Wasp* lurched over towards the right, and then seemed to drop like a stone. Jim swung her over towards the left desperately, despairing. He straightened out a little, but he had no chance to make a landing on the skids.

Crash!

The left wing hit the ground first, and the whole of the *Wasp* seemed to shudder like a live thing. The rending din as the wing crumpled up was like thunder. There was another crash, and the last piece of the wing, nearest the cabin, gave way. Dust and debris and ice spewed all about them, the cabin thudded to the earth, and *Wasp* seemed to reel over towards the left, was poised for a few seconds in mid-air, and then crashed again, on the other wing.

Nothing in the cabin remained in its place, the wounded men were hurled together in one corner, and Buster and the Doctor thudded into each other and then lost their balance. Any moment they expected the cabin to collapse about them.

But nothing more happened.

Both wings of the biplane were in ruins, and the cabin was badly dented, but they had landed upright, and the doors were not blocked! For a few seconds Jim Penfold sat absolutely still in the control seat. It seemed hardly possible that they had crashed and yet escaped with so little injury.

Then Buster's roar shattered the silence after the rending din of the smash, and Jim saw his friend tearing at one of the doors. At the same moment Jim saw what the trouble was.

Less than a hundred yards across the ice field, a man was standing at the propeller of the

White King. He was swinging it like a madman, and suddenly there was a roar that seemed to shake the earth as the single engine awakened.

The Boss was there—the Boss would get away.

Jim was out of his seat in a few seconds, and like Buster he leapt to the ice field, managed to keep his balance somehow, and then raced towards the enemy. Both lads had automatics in their hands, and were prepared to take any risk to stop the other's getaway.

But it was madness!

Pete Morgan was inside, hugging the machine-gun, and as he saw the youngsters coming he opened fire. The Boss was waiting on tenterhooks for the man to come inside. He was at the throttle, but he could not operate the machine for that take-off.

The *King* was quivering as the engine roared, and the pilot raced desperately for the cabin door. Bullets were kicking up little sprays of ice in front of the two lads, but they were hardly aware of the danger.

Firing as they went, they felt a dreadful fear that the enemy would after all escape. It mustn't happen! Whatever else, they must catch the Boss!

And then suddenly Jim heard a voice in his ear, and Buster half-turned, as he recognised the Doctor. The stout little medico had raced after them, the Tommy gun in his hands, and now he opened fire, riddling the *King*.

He had a much easier mark than Pete Morgan, who had only the three running figures to aim at, and the bullets crashed through the safety glass. The pilot was actually in the cabin but he threw up his arms suddenly, and crashed downwards. At the same moment the enemy's machine-gun stopped working, and they saw Pete Morgan slump across a seat, badly wounded.

Only the Boss was left!

The swarthy man stood there indeterminately for a few seconds, a gun in his hand. The Doctor had stopped firing but at the slightest sign of another shooting, he would start again. The Boss seemed to realise it. His face was ghastly as he stepped towards the cabin door, his hands stretched high above his head in a token of surrender.

He had given in—and the expedition party had won!

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The truth was hard to believe, and it seemed incredible to the two youngsters that they had actually come to the end of the battle, and that the suspense and uncertainty of the past few days was really over.

They stumbled towards the cabin, watching the Boss carefully and prepared for a trick. But the man was beaten, and he realised it. The odds were too heavy now, and the only thing he worried about was an opportunity for saving his own skin.

Jim reached the cabin door first, and his voice was grim.

"Get outside!" he snapped.

The Boss hesitated for a second, and then obeyed. Buster kept his gun trained on the man while the Doctor felt for automatics in the man's pockets. He found two, and transferred them to his own pockets while Jim jumped into the cabin.

The one thought in his mind now was for the Professor, and he heaved a tremendous sigh of relief as he saw the bearded scientist sitting in one of the seats, with his eyes wide open and revealing his thankfulness. He was bound, of course, but Jim made short work of the ropes.

"Wounded badly, sir?" he asked.

"Little more than a scratch," said the Professor. "Well done, my boy, well done indeed! I didn't expect to set eyes on you again—or any of the others."

"You very nearly didn't," said Jim grimly. "Ah, here's the Doctor."

Doctor Humbolt stepped into the cabin, beamed at the Professor, and then bent over the unconscious Morgan. The man was still breathing, but the doctor knew that he had no chance of living for long.

"And the pilot's dead," he said soberly. "A dreadful business in every way. However, I can have a look at you, Ray."

"I'm all right," snapped the other man, but the Doctor grunted. He found a nasty bullet wound in the Professor's shoulder—near the chest—and he knew the other must have been in considerable pain. Luckily the first aid material was all in the *White King*, and he was able to get to work immediately.

"You'll take charge of the Boss," he told Jim Penfold. "Better tie him up, it seems a habit out here!"

Jim chuckled a little. In the immense relief that he felt he would have laughed at anything.

"Buster's just starting on him, sir. Sure you don't want any help?"

The Doctor shook his head, and Jim jumped outside. It was strange, he reflected, that he and Buster should be face to face with the Boss again, and that they should be tying his hands behind him for the second time.

Was it only a week—less than a week!—since they had left the man in the barn, after stopping the attempt on the *White King?* It seemed like years.

Buster obviously thought the same, for he worked in silence until the Boss's hands were securely tied. Then he grunted.

"Time we started asking questions, Jim?"

"Ye-es." Jim Penfold looked into the frightened eyes of his prisoner. He found it hard to believe that any man could have committed the crimes that this fellow had, and yet it was true.

And the crimes were somehow concerned with him, and with his father. That was the thing that Jim wanted to understand more than anything else. Why had the Boss tried to kidnap him? What was the vital importance of the *King?*

"Yes," he repeated grimly, "it's past time you talked."

The Boss's lips trembled.

"No—not to you. To Crane——"

"The Skipper's hurt. If he should die," snapped Jim, "you'll hang for the murder! In any case you will probably end up on the gallows. You're going to talk whether you want to or not!"

As he spoke he poked his gun towards the crook's middle, and the swarthy man gasped with fear. Fear, after the things he had done! Jim's lips curled in contempt.

But even then he was not to know immediately what had happened, for there came a sudden shout from George Ayling, back in the cabin of the *Wasp*. Both youngsters looked round, and saw him pointing towards the sky.

A moment later they stood dead still staring towards two little black dots up there. Two aeroplanes, making with all speed for the temporary landing field. Was it possible that there were more of the Boss's men?

For a few seconds he was afraid that they were, but a glance at the Boss's face told him that the man was still dreadfully afraid, and he would not have been had the newcomers been his associates. Buster was grinning, and he swung round to Jim with a cry.

"Canadian 'planes, Jim! Our rescue party's arrived!"

The two biplanes were rapidly getting nearer, and now they were losing height fast. They waved out of the cabins as they circled for landing, and then prepared to hit the ice. Jim and Buster were watching wide-eyed. Almost simultaneously the skids landed, sending those ice sprays in all directions, and then with their engines roaring the biplanes came to a standstill.

As they did so and before the engines were switched off, the doors opened. Two youthful men in uniform jumped out, one going towards the *King* and the others towards George Ayling, who was standing up somehow by the *Wasp* and waving wildly.

Jim and Buster were conscious of a tremendous relief as the young airman came up, smiling cheerfully.

"How's things?" he asked, in a laconic way that made Jim smile. "Didn't think your message was true, but looks it was!"

"It was true all right," said Jim Penfold grimly, and he explained a little of what had happened. As he talked, the airman's face grew grim. At the finish the Boss, his eyes darting to and fro, found three pairs of hard eyes fixed on him, and he knew that the two lads and the Canadian Air Force flier would be merciless.

"Now," said Jim in a steely voice, "talk! We want to know what the whole game is—and first of all, your name."

The Boss drew a deep breath.

"My—my name's Miller!" he gasped. "Miller—brother of one of the directors of the Aeroplane Company! But——"

The lads gasped with the surprise of that information, and then waited tensely after Jim snapped a single question.

"And why did you want the *White King?*"

In a few seconds, they knew, they would be told the truth. The whole series of outrages would be explained, and knew that he would be as surprised by the denouement as he had been by the identity of the crook.

"Out with it!" he snapped again, and the Boss's lips opened.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE EXPLANATION

JIM PENFOLD had not the slightest idea of what was coming, and he waited as tensely as the others. As he looked at the Boss, he heard a scuffling of footsteps behind him, and turning quickly he saw the Skipper and George Ayling, the latter being helped by Canadian pilots. The Skipper's face was grim.

"I wanted to be in at the death, Jim. You carry on."

Jim spared a fleeting thought of thankfulness that the Skipper had not been seriously hurt, and then returned to the Boss. The crook was ashen-faced, for he knew there was not the slightest chance of escape now. But he managed to gasp the words:

"The—the jewels! There were a lot built in the *White King!* Built into the cabin wall!"

The words came with such a crash of surprise that the others could hardly credit their truth. But Jim spoke swiftly.

"What jewels are you talking about?"

"They—they belonged to a rich American. I stole them—and my brother helped me to hide them at the aeroplane factory."

"Your brother!" exclaimed the Skipper. "Which—who——"

Jim explained quickly what the man's name was, and they were aghast to hear that the merry-faced Miller who had seen them off on the start of the flight had been in this affair somewhere. But the crook was talking again now, as though he was anxious to get the whole story finished.

"We had them safely enough there, and then they disappeared! We didn't know who had them, or where they had gone. But we believed Penfold—your father—knew."

Jim's eyes flashed.

"Are you accusing my father of theft?"

"I—no, I don't know! But he knew where they were! I threatened him with death if he didn't talk, and he refused to say a word. That's why I planned to fire the *White King*, to frighten him. But afterwards, when he tried to get out of the country, I caught him. I forced him to tell me where the jewels were, and he admitted that they were built into the cabin. He had arranged with a builder at the factory to put them there!"

The Skipper drew a deep breath.

"This gets more fantastic with every word," he said. "If it's true, Sir Arthur Penfold, one of the richest men in England, has been handling precious stones that did not belong to him. There could be no other reason for the secrecy. Are you telling the truth?"

"I swear I am!" gasped Miller. "We—we spent all night tearing down the cabin walls! The stones are there—diamonds, emeralds, sapphires—I've never seen such a collection. They must be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds—I know they are!"

The Skipper swung towards the *King*.

"Where did you put them?"

"They're in the control-board pocket now," muttered the crook, and the Skipper walked off. He was wounded in the head, but not seriously, and Jim was glad that he was here to puzzle out this strange story. The lad's heart was heavy, for it seemed quite certain that his father had been mixed up with a crooked game—with the theft of these jewels.

The Boss was licking his lips and darting his eyes to and fro all the time the Skipper was away. The airman returned at last, however, and his face was grave. He was carrying something in his clenched right hand, and as he reached the others he opened his palm, to reveal a diamond as big as a walnut, and a sapphire nearly as large.

"He's telling the truth, Jim. There are hundreds of wonderful stones there. One of the biggest collections I have ever seen. And they were in the *White King* all the time! It doesn't seem possible!"

"It's true!" muttered Miller. "We dug them out——"

"Yes, I saw where you had been working at the cabin walls. Well—that's the explanation of part of it. But where did you get the members of the gang that came to your support?"

Jim thought of the crew of the ill-fated aeroplane, and shivered a little. The Boss explained quickly.

"They were American gangsters who had helped me get away with the stones in the first place," he said. "They knew I was coming after you, and they were waiting at St. John's. I sent a coded wireless message to them last night, and they arrived on the scene after flying through the night."

The Skipper nodded.

"That sounds reasonable," he admitted. "And I suppose the tall fellow—the fourth member of your crew—is one of them?"

"Yes. He was waiting at a trading post a hundred miles away, with a steam-launch," explained the Boss. "We had a large organization—ten men in all. And the aeroplanes. But for those jewels it was worth it!"

"Yes, it would have repaid you a dozen times for your efforts and your expense," admitted the Skipper. "I can understand that all right, although I'm puzzled at the fact that you had men so near here."

"It isn't so far from America," muttered the Boss. "I telephoned them from London, before I started off myself. We flew over Iceland——"

"So that's the way you came," said the Skipper slowly. "Well, you certainly took enough risks. Now—you admit you and your brother were in this crooked game. Is there anyone else?"

"No—only Pete Morgan and his gang. A gang of roughs from London," explained the Boss. "And Penfold——"

There was a cunning expression in the man's eyes as he uttered that name, and Jim, watching him, wondered what was meant. He did not have long to wait, for the crook burst out:

"Look here, Crane! Penfold's in a cottage near Southampton, being looked after by some of Morgan's men. I can lay my hands on him any time. Listen! If you'll let me go, and say nothing about my brother's part in the affair, I'll keep quiet about Penfold! If you don't, *he'll* be in a mess!"

The Skipper looked at Jim, whose eyes were filled with uncertainty and alarm. But the lad shook his head.

"No," he said. "The Boss must be punished, Skipper, whatever the cost. And if Dad has taken part in some crooked scheme—well, it cannot be helped. But—but perhaps we can see him and talk to him first."

The Skipper nodded without hesitation.

"We've got a fortnight's work to do on repairs," he said, "and we can limp back to St. John's and have them done. While the *King* is being overhauled, we can charter a 'plane to get back to England for a few days." The Skipper smiled as he turned to the Canadian Air Force men, who were listening open-mouthed at this discussion. "You will be quite willing, I hope, for us to take the prisoners back ourselves?"

The Squadron Commander kept his thoughts to himself and nodded. It was not strictly in accordance with the law, but he held too great an admiration for Skipper John Crane to refuse.

"Fine!" said the Skipper. "Then we'll get back to St. John's just as soon as we can!"

But there were a lot of preparations to be done before they could get away. Pete Morgan was dead, but the tall American crook was still alive, and so was the man whom Ken Wright and the lads had wounded during the attack on the *Wasp*. It was arranged for them to go to a St. John's Hospital, together with George Ayling and the Professor. Bert Chase's wound was not serious, nor had the Skipper and Ken Wright suffered more than scalp wounds.

The *White King* made slow progress back to St. John's on its one engine. The Skipper was at the controls, and Ken was with him, but in order to lessen the weight, the Doctor and the others, including Buster and Jim, flew back with the Air Force men. Others would be sent out with petrol to get the *Wasp* back to civilization.

By early afternoon they were all ready, and by nightfall they were back at St. John's. Both Buster and Jim were too tired to know a great deal of what went on about them. They slept like logs for twelve hours. When at last they awakened, it was to learn that the Skipper had made all arrangements, and that a twin-engined monoplane was fuelled and ready for the flight to England. The Skipper, Ken Wright and the two lads were to fly back, with Miller—or the Boss.

Jim tried to make himself forget the shadow hanging over him, but throughout that long, uneventful trans-Atlantic flight, he could not rid himself of anxiety.

Was his father really safe? And if the Boss was telling the truth in that direction, could his father have some explanation of the hidden jewels, the collection of fiery valuables that had been built into the cabin of the *King*.

He did not know, and he was at a fever-pitch of anxiety to find out. The wonder of the flight was forgotten because of it, and the others realised his worries, and did not try to cheer him up.

They flew over Ireland at last, without the slightest trouble, and it was not long before they landed at Southampton. And, three hours after the landing, the two airmen, the youngsters and the Boss entered the small cottage where Sir Arthur Penfold had been kept a prisoner since the night before the start of the *White King*. The baronet looked haggard and exhausted, but he jumped up from his truckle bed as the little party entered, while Jim Penfold waited on tenterhooks to learn the worst—or the best.

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"Thank heaven you've come!" exclaimed the baronet. "I thought these devils would never let me get out alive!" He took the Skipper's hand warmly, and then he saw Jim. He stopped dead still, staring at the youngster. "Why—*Jim!* What are you doing here?"

Before Jim could speak, the Skipper answered.

"Jim was with us, Sir Arthur, but that can be explained later. First I should tell you the story I have heard from Miller, and I would like to hear your side of the question."

The baronet paled and sat down. He listened while the Skipper's quiet voice related the statement the Boss had made. All the time the Boss was standing by the wall, an unpleasant grin on his face. Obviously he believed that there was a chance of his getting free, in order that Sir Arthur would not be forced to face the accusation of possessing stolen jewels.

It was finished at last, and Sir Arthur passed his hand wearily across his eyes. His voice was dull and lifeless.

"Well, Crane, up to a point all that Miller says is true. Some months ago I bought those jewels——"

"Bought them?" exclaimed Jim eagerly. "Then they're yours——"

His father shook his head.

"No, Jim, it's not quite as easy as that. At the time, I believed they were honest goods, and I paid Miller here for them. Afterwards I learned they had been stolen. If"—the baronet's voice was trembling now—"if I had gone to the police and told the truth I would have lost a tremendous sum of money—more than I could afford! In fact it would have ruined me. Like a fool, I decided to keep the jewels.

"Then Miller came after me again. I had broken the law by keeping the diamonds and other stones. He demanded money for his silence. I refused to pay, and he threatened to steal the jewels again. Had he done so I would have been a ruined man, for in order to recuperate my losses, I would have had to sell the jewels. Afraid of losing them, I decided to hide them in the *White King*, and I arranged with one of the men in the factory to build them into the cabin walls. Miller, I believed, would give up trying to get them after a few weeks.

"Then I realised how serious he was. First he threatened to kidnap you, Jim. Then he threatened to take me a prisoner until I told him where the jewels were. I arranged for you to go to Doncaster, and I tried to hide myself, but he had been watching me, and kept me prisoner. I—I had to tell him at last where the jewels were. I could not stand his cruelty any longer! That is the whole story, Crane!"

It was impossible not to believe the baronet, and Jim no longer felt ashamed of his father's part in this crime. He could understand how worried the older man had been, and that he had made a big mistake in not going to the police, and standing his losses.

But Jim could not find it in his heart to blame him.

It was Miller, the Boss, who spoke next.

"Sure, that's true, Crane. Penfold paid me a heap of money for those jewels before he knew they were stolen. I——"

"Where's the money now?" snapped the Skipper.

Miller looked at him insolently.

"You'd like to know, eh? Listen, Crane. I'm sticking to that money. If you try any tricks I'll tell the police all I know, and Penfold will know the inside of a jail!"

Jim's heart was heavy, for it seemed to him that there was no way of avoiding that: certainly they would not let the Boss go free, after his murderous attacks on the crew of the *King*. But Skipper Crane was smiling—smiling!

"You've made a mistake, Miller, and you don't realise it. We have those jewels now. I'm going to suggest Sir Arthur returns them at once to the man who you stole them from. That man will not make a charge of theft—or any kind of charge—against him."

"But I will!" snapped Miller, but he looked uneasy.

"When the police learn the whole truth and know the jewels have been returned, no one will take any notice of you!" flashed the Skipper. "But they'll take notice when the story of the attacks on the *King* is told. You will probably serve ten years in prison——"

"No, no! You can't do it!" gasped Miller. "You daren't!"

"Are you prepared to return the jewels now, and to take the risk of telling the police the whole story?" the Skipper asked Sir Arthur.

The baronet drew a deep breath, and Jim hung on his words. He felt a tremendous relief when they came out quietly.

"Yes, Crane. I know now that I have been a fool, and I will face the consequences."

"Fine!" exclaimed the Skipper. "Now you see, Miller, *you're* in a nasty mess. There's just one chance for you——"

Miller looked at him, scared out of his wits. "What—what is it?"

"Repay Sir Arthur the money he paid for the stolen stones!" snapped the Skipper. "Every penny of it. Then sign a confession of all you have done. You can get hold of the money within twenty-four hours, and the confession can be signed now. Then—I'll let you escape! It is the only way to stop a terrible story coming out—the only way of saving yourself from a long term of imprisonment. Well?"

For a moment the Boss looked as though he could have murdered the speaker, but at last he nodded.

"All right, I'll do it. But my brother's in this racket—what about him?"

"He will pay for the repairs to the *White King* and the extra expenses of the expedition," said the Skipper grimly. "And both of you will be lucky. If any one of us had been killed, there would have been a charge of murder against you, and I would not have let you escape then."

"Don't forget Pete Morgan died, and the men in the other biplane," said Buster, speaking for the first time at the cottage.

The Skipper nodded.

"I'm not forgetting, Buster. But they were all criminals, prepared to do murder. To avenge them, it would mean ruining Sir Arthur, and I think he has suffered enough. Miller—I am going to be with you every minute until the money is paid, your confession is made, and your brother's agreement has been obtained. The slightest trick, and the police will know, so be careful!"

. . . . .

Boss Miller and his brother were so scared of facing the police that they caused no trouble, and thus the whole affair was hushed up. Jim knew that his father had suffered dreadfully for his criminal folly, and he was heartily glad that there was no need for the whole story to be made public.

Reports of the attacks on the *King* created a tremendous sensation, and so did the escape of Boss Miller, but no one ever learned the truth. Miller fled to India, and he never returned to England as far as Jim and Buster knew.

Seven days after the return to England, Jim and Buster were in Sir Arthur Penfold's London house, with the Skipper. Sir Arthur was a different man now, gentler and more considerate. He had raised no objections at all to Jim and Buster going on the expedition, and the party was to set off in a few hours. At St. Johns, the other explorers were fit and well again, and the *White King* was almost ready for the proper start for the flight to the Arctic regions.

Jim and Buster felt a tremendous excitement at the prospect ahead of them. Sir Arthur realised that, and as he wished his son and the other "stowaway" good-bye, he smiled quietly.

"Jim, but for you and your friend, terrible things—worse even than those that happened—might have come about. You've both played a man's part in this affair. When you return I hope you will both look on me as—as a father and a friend."

Jim nodded: he could not speak, and even Buster's eyes were misty.

"That's mighty good of you, sir."

Skipper John Crane chuckled.

"It's a fine arrangement, and it'll stop your stowing away habit, Buster. But you're right, Sir Arthur. They're not lads now: they're men! And get ready, men, we've the Atlantic to fly again, and then three months by the North Pole. Hurry!"

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